

The illustration depicts a young man with dark blue hair and golden eyes, wearing a white shirt, embracing a young woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes. The woman is wearing a white dress with a blue bow and has a black eye patch over her right eye. They are standing in a field of pink flowers with falling petals. In the background, a large white statue of a man's head is visible.

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10

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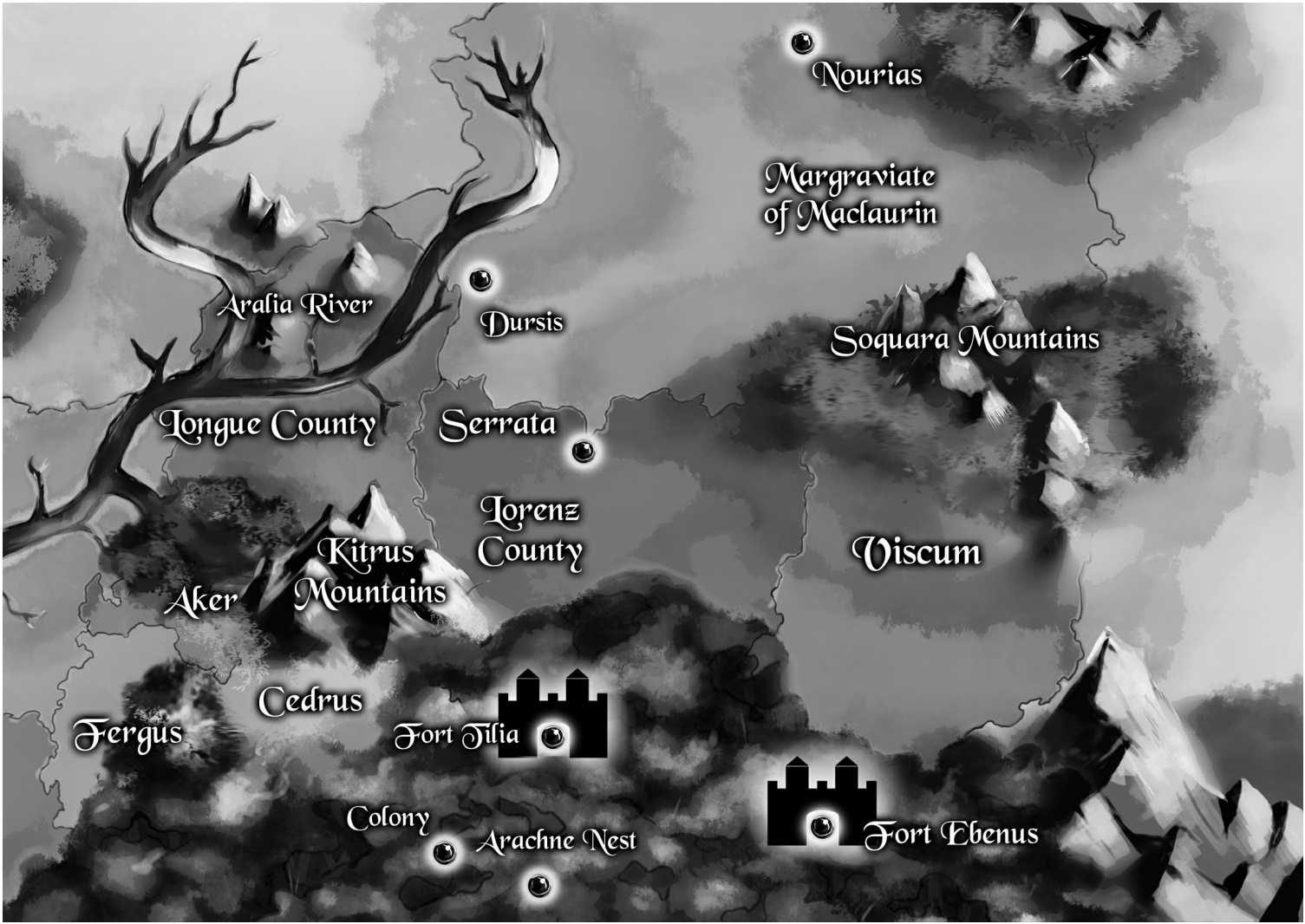


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Chapter 1: Tragedy at the Reclamation Village

Back when I first met Shiran, she told me something when we went down into that underground mausoleum.

“Even if I am never to see it with my own eyes again, I want to protect my hometown. I want to protect the villages that share its circumstances. I want to protect the comrades who fight by my side.”

That was Shiran’s wish, the reason she continued to risk her life in battle. And right now, right in front of her, all that she wanted to protect was crumbling to pieces.

Houses burned and collapsed. Villagers fled for their lives. With each swing of the armored men’s swords, something irreplaceable to Shiran tumbled to the ground. She was already a bit unstable and had been these last few days. She’d agonized and suffered over her undead body, she’d concealed disappointment and despair, and she’d even regretted her own existence. For her, the situation we found ourselves in was fatal. The emotional balance she’d just barely maintained had now been thrown decisively out of kilter.

“Aaaaaargh!”

A ghoul roared—or perhaps it was the death cry of a prayer being trampled underfoot—and Shiran flew from the manamobile’s driver’s seat.

“Wait! Shir—” I stretched out my hand on impulse but I grabbed nothing but air. “So fast?!”

My eyes shot open. Shiran was supposed to be significantly weaker because of her mana deficiency, yet she moved just now with a speed impossible for a debilitated body.

After Shiran hit the ground, she ran off without a moment’s delay. In the blink of an eye, her figure was in the distance, looking so small as she headed straight for the village.

“I’ll go after her!” Rose yelled.

Rose had been acting as Leah and Helena's guard, so she was already outside of the manamobile. She was the only one who could chase Shiran right away.

"Wait!" I yelled back.

"Master?" she asked, coming to a stop and turning around.

"Don't go on your own!"

It'd be one thing if we could catch her before she got to the village, but she was clearly faster than Rose. As long as we didn't know what was going on down there, we needed to be cautious. We had to distinguish between what we had to give up on, and what we didn't.

I bit my lip, but there was no time for hesitation. I quickly turned around and raised the cloth covering the carriage. With nobody controlling it anymore, the manamobile shook mightily, but I ignored it and waited until the eyes of everyone inside gathered on me.

"Master! What was that just—"

"The village is under attack!" I shouted, cutting Lily off. "Shiran saw it, went berserk, and ran off!"

"No way!"

"I don't know what's going on, but we can't let her go alone. Lily! Gerbera! With me!"

"Me too?!" Gerbera yelped in shock.

I nodded and explained, "Shiran's lost all sense of reason. At worst, she might die if we don't pin her down. And since we don't know who the enemy is, we need to go in with everything we have."

I'd only gotten a glance at the armed force attacking the village. It looked like they were all wearing matching armor. It was highly likely they were soldiers, or maybe even knights. I'd never seen the design before, so I couldn't distinguish with whom they were affiliated. Still, I could tell that they'd received formal combat training. Not only that, we had no idea how many of them there were.

Bringing only my servants that could be seen in public might not be enough this time. There was the armed force attacking the village to consider, as well as

the now-berserk Shiran. I'd decided that to prepare for the worst, I needed both my strongest servants at hand.

I was, of course, fully aware that bringing Gerbera meant revealing our identities. It wasn't hard to imagine what kind of effect this would have. At worst, we wouldn't be able to stay in Aker anymore and would have to start over from scratch. However, my companions' safety was the most important thing to me. I wasn't going to forgo my priorities.

"Everyone else hide until we get back. Rose, Ayame, Lobivia, stay here and guard Leah and Helena."

"I'll—" Looking discontented, Lobivia started to say something, but upon meeting my eyes, she nodded with a frown. "If you say so..."

"Good girl."

I ruffled her red hair, then immediately left the manamobile behind.



By the time I got out of the vehicle, Shiran was already out of sight. I'd given my orders as quickly as possible, and it'd only been about twenty seconds since she ran off, so we weren't too far behind.

Gerbera hefted me up and started running, Lily following close behind. These two were fast. I hadn't picked them simply to prepare for the worst. Nonetheless, not even they could catch up to Shiran before she got to the village. I'd expected this, though; Shiran had run off too fast.

Shiran had once been extolled as the strongest knight in the northern Woodlands, managing to fend off Juumonji Tatsuya for a while, but she'd been in her best shape then and had had the support of the four sprites contracted to her. Only with the magical boost she got from the sprites could she exhibit enough physical strength to cross blades with a cheater.

But now that she'd lost her sense of reason, she couldn't get support from them. The fact that she'd displayed superhuman speed despite this meant that she was using her physical abilities as a ghoul—as a monster. That was a major problem.

“We’re here!” I shouted.

We reached the walls surrounding the village. There was no villager standing guard in the watchtower. Instead, we found two men collapsed in front of the gate. They weren’t villagers. Were they marauders? One had been decapitated, and the other had suffered a deep cut running down his collarbone. Shiran had apparently cut them down. Judging by the vast amount of blood splattered around the area, it had been a short yet violent battle. As we ran past their corpses, the details of their blood-soaked armor came into sight.

“That’s some pretty nice gear...”

It was much better than what the villagers wore, which was whatever they had on hand. Their equipment was uniform and of the highest quality. It looked like my earlier conjecture of them being some kind of army or knightly order was correct.

What the hell was going on? The Royal Army and the Order of National Defense made up the armed forces in Aker, but it was difficult to imagine them attacking their citizens when they fought to *protect* their country.

Was this a foreign army, then? But in that case, this meant war with Aker. In this world, the Holy Order served to protect public order, so even a grand noble like Margrave Maclaurin could be ruined for needlessly stoking the fires of conflict. So what could this possibly be?

While I considered the possibilities, Gerbera and Lily continued moving. The gates were closed, so they leaped over the walls to get in. Most reclamation villages expanded as they cleared the lands around them, building several layers of defensive walls as the expansion went on, and this village was no exception. It had two layers of walls.

After we crossed the outer wall, fields spread out before us. At this point, it wouldn’t be strange for villagers to mistake Gerbera for an attacking monster and launch themselves at us. She could handle any villager with ease, but we still remained cautious.

No attack came, though. There was nobody working the fields to begin with. Now that I thought of it, I hadn’t seen any people around the fields when I was looking down at the village earlier.

Gerbera, still carrying me in her arms, ran across the empty path in the middle of the fields, Lily following close behind. On the way, we heard a whistle. Was that some kind of signal? I couldn't tell, but it definitely came from *someone*. I braced myself for what we might find.

We reached the inner walls. Things were noisy on the other side. I could hear many people roaring and screaming...and then came a howl of the dead—Shiran. Gerbera used her threads to leap over the wall in a single bound. Looking down from above, I could see Shiran driving her sword into an enemy a small distance away.

“Aaaaargh!”

“Gah?!”

Her intense diagonal slash repelled the enemy's sword and kept going right through his armor, deep into his torso. The sword that had been so thoroughly tempered to protect humanity was now dyed red in human blood.

There were two other armored corpses on the ground. Judging by the situation, Shiran had killed them too. There were also many other bodies lying around. These ones weren't wearing armor, nor were they armed with weapons. They were the villagers who'd fallen prey to the marauders. From what I could see, there were more than ten of them. I didn't even want to think of how many victims there were if the same thing was happening elsewhere in the village. Just maybe, Shiran's enraged howl was a proxy for the dead's indignation.

“Aaaargh!”

Shiran kicked the body off her sword, focusing her blue eye on her next target. Several of the marauders took formation behind their shields. They'd managed to adjust in the time it took for three of their comrades to fall prey to her weapon. It looked like they were resorting to magic.

“There's no need to panic! Calm down and deal with this!” one of the men to the rear yelled. He was probably their leader.

Gerbera jumped from the wall just as Shiran charged into action herself.

“Aaaaargh!”

Shiran lunged at the men, letting out a dreadful shriek. She closed the distance to them in no time at all.

“Now!”

At the officer’s command, a glyph took shape among the enemy’s rearguard. A clean light enveloped the ground over a wide area. I could sense no aggression in it, but it seemed to be a different matter for Shiran.

“Gah?! Grrr...”

A pained growl leaked from her lips. During her rampage against Juumonji Tatsuya, no amount of injury had been enough to stop her, but for some reason, she looked to be in horrible agony now. Still, she didn’t stop her advance. Even though her movements were dulled, she closed in on her enemy and swung her sword, leaving it entirely to her violent momentum.

“Aaaaaargh!”

Sword and shield clashed with a jarring clang. The man who bore the blow lost his footing and stumbled, but that was all. Astonishingly, he managed to stop Shiran’s attack. Immediately, one of the others in the vanguard supported his staggering comrade. Their movements were smooth. Shiran had lost her opportunity for a follow-up attack. In fact, the remaining vanguard were launching a counterattack of their own.

Shiran dodged one of their swords, but she had to break her balance to do so. Another strike aimed for her neck, and she instantly raised her blade to defend herself. Even with poor balance, Shiran’s rampage was abnormally strong.

“Gaaargh?! ”

Nevertheless, the blow pushed Shiran back.

My eyes shot open. “Impossible...”

The marauders had managed to repel Shiran’s charge. That was an extraordinary feat. Sensing that her enemy would go on the offensive, Shiran rolled through using her backward momentum and leaped far away from them. She poised herself to charge again but suddenly stumbled.

“G-Gaargh...?”

She fell to her knees and thrust both hands to the ground. I could tell what was wrong. After all, I'd predicted this.

"Shit! She's out of mana!"

Shiran's current mana capacity was pretty small. She'd just wielded what little she had all at once to bring out an explosive power, but she couldn't possibly keep that up. Perhaps having exhausted what minimal mana she needed to function normally, she collapsed onto the ground. Her enemies wouldn't let this opportunity pass either.

"Now's our chance! Finish her!"

The marauders closed in.

"Like hell I'll let you!" I yelled, unleashing the mana I'd been accumulating on our way here. "Misty Lodge!"

The men noticed me, but it was too late. The dense mist pouring from my body enveloped the surroundings in an instant.

"What the?! Company! Fall back!"

The men retreated cautiously. Now it was *my* chance to act.

"Go!"

"Ssster!"

Asarina lunged out of my gauntlet, her long body stretching all the way to the fallen Shiran and retrieving her.

"All right!" I caught her in my arms, then lowered her to the ground. "Are you okay?!"

I called out to her, but Shiran remained unmoving, just like a real corpse. She was unconscious. I knew it was because of mana deficiency, but I couldn't do anything about it right now. With Shiran secured, I shifted my focus to the marauders.

"What's with these guys...?" I muttered.

My Misty Lodge magic wasn't just a smoke screen; it was perception magic that allowed me to obtain information on everything within the shroud of mist.

The accuracy of the information depended on the density of the fog. Currently, I kept it suppressed to about a quarter of my maximum output, but I could still gain a significant amount of information.

The magic was telling me that the soft light emitting from the ground was debilitation magic meant to obstruct the movements of undead monsters. Also, the enemy vanguard had reinforcement magic from the rearguard strengthening their physical capabilities.

Yes. The reason the vanguard had managed to push back Shiran's charge wasn't simply because of their coordination, but because of the support of debilitation and reinforcement magic from the rearguard. There weren't many people who could use magic in this world. Those who could use debilitation and reinforcement magic, which were difficult to apply, were exceedingly few in number. Not even the Alliance Knights had so many people capable of doing so while also using them in group tactics.

I revised my already-high evaluation of the threat they posed even further. Who exactly were they? I wanted to know, but I didn't have the time to think about it. Having noticed the outbreak of mist, their comrades elsewhere in the village were gathering at this location. It would be dangerous if they all formed up. Victory went to the swift. I would crush them right here and now.

"Gerbera!"

"Loud and clear!"

I unleashed my greatest combatant without hesitation. Gerbera charged in. Debilitation magic was definitely a threat, but there was no effect when the opponent's mana capacity was so much higher. A cheater was pretty much the only one who could use any on the Great White Spider of the Depths. This number of enemies wasn't a threat to Gerbera at her full strength.

"What?!"

A sudden chill assaulted me. My perception magic rang alarm bells in my head about a single enemy. It was the man who'd been giving orders. Something about him was bad. The moment that premonition struck me, right before I could warn Gerbera, his eyes shone with an ominous light.

“Gah?!”

In the next instant, Gerbera grunted. She halted her charge and leaped back, somehow managing to return to our side.

“You bastard... What did you do...?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Gerbera, what—?!”

The moment I saw her face, I was speechless. A violet pattern ran down her white cheeks and along her neck like a tattoo. I could tell that it continued down over her entire body, interfering with the mana inside her.



“Debilitation magic...?”

A terrifying burden was placed on her entire body, obstructing the flow of mana within. Any normal person would likely die from this.

“No...”

Was this really magic? The man hadn’t accumulated any mana, which should’ve been necessary for such a high-level spell. Despite that, it’d worked on Gerbera, meaning its effect was preposterous. It was as if it was...

“Who are you...?” I asked, glaring at the man who had cast this on Gerbera.

He had quirky brown hair and delicate features. He was slender, but he had a well-trained body and wore the same heavy armor as the others.

“Oh, well, excuse me for that,” he replied with the sweet voice of a poet, but the malice behind his words put the act to waste. “My name is Travis,” he said, putting on an elegant smile that was entirely for show. “Commander of the Holy Order’s Fourth Company, Sir Travis Mortimer, the one who shall slay the wretched fallen knight.”

Chapter 2: The Skanda's Worries *lino Yuna's POV*

A few days had passed since I started my journey to visit the minor imperial noble, Viscount Bann. I wanted to confirm the rumors of the fake savior myself. After meeting the vice marshal of the Holy Order, and also acting commander of its Second Company, Gordon Cavill, I ended up working with him. We weren't on our own, however. There were five other knights from the Holy Order with us.

We booked an inn in a village we stopped at, and after finding my room and changing out of my traveling clothes, I dropped by the room Gordon and the others were using. One of the knights came to the door to greet me, then invited me in.

"Ooh, Miss lino. Welcome."

Gordon was seated at a table and welcomed me warmly. With dark skin, a bald head, and a large build, he looked somewhat scary, but he had a gentlemanly demeanor. At first, I'd been a bit tense when speaking with him, but after a few days, all my nervousness was gone.

As I walked to the table, which was covered in maps and documents, I immediately asked about their investigation into the fake savior. Gordon's Second Company was made up of around four hundred knights scattered about in the region's small noble territories. They were working with local forces to investigate the fake savior. Gordon then compiled all the information they gathered together. Unfortunately, they hadn't gotten any satisfactory results today either.

"I'm sorry we haven't been able to get anything useful," Gordon said, his shoulders slumping. He looked like a dejected bear, which was somehow comical. "We've already received useful information from you, yet here we are in this state. I can't apologize enough."

He was referring to the information I'd given them about Kudou Riku. Judging by how monsters had annihilated the villages the fake savior visited, I suspected

the mastermind behind Fort Tilia's attack, the Lord of Darkness—Kudou Riku—had a hand in this. Because of that, Gordon had asked me for assistance. I'd complied and had told him everything I knew, but I'd simply disclosed what I had on hand. I hadn't done anything yet.

"Investigating a fake savior isn't the kind of thing to turn out results right away," I said, shaking my head. "I know you're trying your best, Sir Gordon."

After working with him, I'd found out that Gordon was a very diligent man. He drove the manamobile during the day and gathered information whenever we reached our destination. Once he got information from the other knights, he carefully scrutinized every detail and collated it together. What's more, he gave pertinent orders to his subordinates and took care to frequently contact the minor nobles who were cooperating with him. Even though the knights accompanying him were each helping in different areas, the amount of work he did on his own was extraordinary. He was so devoted I questioned whether he was getting a proper amount of sleep.

"I can't possibly complain when you work so hard," I said. "Actually, your efforts are amazing."

"Thank you, madam," Gordon said, his rocklike face softening a little, "but I'm ashamed to be praised on this point. What we do is a matter of course. It is our duty. We aren't members of this world, after all."

"Ummm?"

Not members of this world? I didn't understand.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Hmm..." Gordon placed his hand on his chin and thought it over for a bit. After a short pause, he continued. "Miss lino, are you aware of those of blessed blood?"

"Huh? Yes. They're descendants of visitors, right?"

What we called cheats were called blessings in this world, so that was why they called the descendants of visitors "those of blessed blood."

"In truth, every knight of the Holy Order is of blessed blood."

“Huh? Really?”

That was the first I’d heard of it. I reflexively turned to look at Gordon’s subordinates, and they nodded back to me.

“Yes. It’s just as the commander says,” one of them said.

“I had no idea...”

Now that they mentioned it, though, it did make a lot of sense. Gordon had dark skin, which was atypical of this world. Also, thinking back on it, the marshal I’d seen at Fort Ebenus had had facial features similar to ours too. This was because they were descendants of visitors.

“Having said that, not all of blessed blood can become knights of the Holy Order,” another knight, the youngest of the group, added. “The Holy Order is a battle force of the elite meant to fight alongside the great saviors. One cannot become a knight in its ranks without suitable skill. In fact, it is *because* the Holy Order employs a doctrine of strength that only those of blessed blood, and only a select few at that, can join.”

His tone was filled with youthful passion. His aura resembled the late Watanabe of the exploration team.

“So only a portion of those of blessed blood can become knights?” I asked, feeling nostalgic because of the young knight’s resemblance to my former comrade. “I feel like there’s a contradiction there.”

“No, there isn’t,” he replied. “It seems you do not understand what it means to be of blessed blood, madam.”

“Meaning you’re more than just descendants of visitors?”

“Yes, we are. Those of blessed blood inherit blessings through their lineage. Because of that, many excel at mana manipulation, battle tactics, and magic aptitude—all things generally needed for battle. You could say this power is definitive proof that we are of an exalted lineage!”

Watching his subordinate put his hand to his own chest in pride, Gordon smiled wryly.

“That said, I’d rather you not misunderstand, madam,” he said. “Our power is

different from that of the great saviors. It does not surpass the limits of the people of this world. Even among the Alliance Knights and Imperial Knights, there are those like the Raging Bull Knight of the Prairie and the strongest knight of the northern Woodlands who surpass the average knight of the Holy Order. But excluding those exceptions, you could say the Holy Order is a gathering of the utmost elite.”

The strongest knight of the northern Woodlands referred to Shiran, who was currently traveling with Majima. I’d heard that, even if it was just for a short time, she’d crossed blades with Juumonji, who excelled in close combat as a warrior. Just as one would expect, not all knights of the Holy Order had the same combat potential.

Nevertheless, they had more than enough strength as it was. For comparison, the members of the Second Company of the Imperial Knights, the ones I’d traveled with for a month, could only take on monsters of the Fringes when in groups of four or five. The Third Company of the Alliance Knights had more experience than them and could apparently accomplish the same with two or three knights.

But what about the Holy Order? According to Gordon, the average knight couldn’t match Shiran, but people like her were exceptions. That meant the strength of the Holy Order’s average knight exceeded that of an Alliance Knight by a fair margin, so each one’s strength was akin to a monster of the Fringes.

The First Company of the Holy Order was composed of around six hundred knights, the Second Company of around four hundred, the Third Company of around three hundred, and the Fourth Company of around two hundred. Much like Gordon’s Second Company, each one functioned as a practically independent organization, so they didn’t really gather as one big army. Still, a single company had significant power.

“That’s amazing,” I said with honest admiration.

“Yes, but that isn’t all,” the youngest knight said, even prouder than before. “Among us, there are those who can even replicate the blessings the saviors before us once used.”

“Huh? You’re telling me there are people out there with inherent abilities?” I

asked, somewhat louder than intended.

Possessing the inherent ability of the Skanda myself, it wasn't hard for me to imagine how big of a deal that was. I was unable to hide my shock, to which the knight nodded greatly.

"Yes. We call these people the beloved of blessed blood. And why hide it? Our commander is an excellent example!"

"Sir Gordon?" I asked, looking at him.

"Yes," he said, humbly nodding. "Although, my ability is far inferior to the original..."

"What are you saying?!" the youngest knight exclaimed. "Sir Gordon Cavill of the Radiant Wings is one of the most prominent among the beloved of blessed blood, even throughout the ages! Are you not the one closest to the great saviors of the past?!"

Gordon probably had the strength to match such praise, but the young knight still seemed a little overzealous. Perhaps he simply idolized Gordon that much. As for Gordon, even though he smiled bitterly, he looked at the young knight with gentle eyes. I could see the close bond they shared.

I was a little relieved to see them like this. One reason I was accompanying Gordon in the first place was to find out what kind of organization the Holy Order was for myself. Louis had been the one to feed me false information regarding Majima and the attack on Fort Tilia, but there'd been a knight of the Holy Order with him too—Travis Mortimer.

If, at the time, he'd given me false information on purpose...and if the Holy Order was involved... Given the situation, my suspicions were reasonable. I planned on using this opportunity to verify what kind of people the knights of the Holy Order were.

After observing them like this, I could see that they were proud, and they devoted themselves to their professional duties. I didn't think they would resort to foul play. It turned out I'd been overthinking things.

"Hm? Is something the matter, Miss Iino?" Gordon asked with a puzzled look.

“No...it’s nothing,” I answered, shaking my head. “It’s just... Um, right. I find it amazing.” I was half trying to change the topic as I attempted to stir the young knight’s interest. “The beloved of blessed blood, you called them? There are others like Sir Gordon, right?”

“Of course!” he answered joyfully. “There are several beloved of blessed blood in the order right now. Among them, the ones with particularly powerful abilities are the four commanders.”

“The commanders?”

I’d heard the names of all the commanders of the Holy Order before: Marshal of the Holy Order and commander of the First Company, Sir Harrison Addington; vice marshal and commander of the Second Company, Sir Gordon Cavill; commander of the Third Company, Lady Vivian Maywood; and finally, commander of the Fourth Company, Sir Travis Mortimer.

“Oh, I’ve met all of them except for Lady Vivian.”

Without even knowing it, I’d met people who’d inherited significant power similar to us visitors. Although, considering that valuable personnel had the most opportunities to meet visitors like me, it wasn’t all that strange.

“Miss lino...you’ve met Mortimer?” Gordon asked me as I pondered over useless information.

“Huh? Sir Travis? Yes, I have.” I wasn’t planning to tell Gordon that I’d met Travis until I finished finding out what kind of organization the Holy Order was, but I figured it was fine now. “I had the opportunity to meet him in a town called Serrata in Lorenz County.”

After answering, I was a little confused by Gordon’s reaction.

“Is that so...?” Gordon said, his expression turning stiff.

Even the air around the other knights changed. Before I knew it, a strange atmosphere fell over the room.

“So? What kind of relationship do you have with Mortimer, Miss lino?” Gordon asked as I stood there in bewilderment.

There was something awkward about his tone. What was going on? This was

the first I'd seen him acting like this, which only confused me all the more. Still, I had no need to hide anything regarding his question.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that... I only had the chance to speak with him once. That's all."

"I see."

I caught a slight hint of relief in his voice. Anxiety started to swell in my chest.

"Is there something wrong with Sir Travis?" I asked.

"No... Not at all," Gordon said, averting his eyes.

He denied it, but the way he acted said otherwise. I looked around the room. I met the eyes of the young knight who'd spoken so much. He visibly started when I did, so I threw him my question.

"There's something, right?"

"No, that's not..."

He surely never thought he'd be cross-examined by a savior. His young and masculine face tensed up. I felt a little sorry for him, but I wasn't going to back down. I stared at him for a few seconds. Unable to bear the pressure, he finally cracked.

"Sir Mortimer...is a somewhat problematic person."

"Problematic?" I repeated, scowling. "Problematic how?"

Faced with my belligerent gaze, Gordon sighed. "I suppose there's no hiding it at this point."

So there really was something.

Gordon let out another long sigh, then gravely said, "Let me make one thing clear first. We knights devote our swords to the saviors. It is the duty of a knight to personify the ideals of justice and the salvation of the weak. Including our marshal, Sir Harrison Addington, there are many knights of the Holy Order who embody this ideal. Though I am still inexperienced, I strive to do the same. This goes for all of my subordinates too."

"Ummm... Right. I know that much."

Having interacted with them, I knew Gordon and his subordinates were virtuous. I hadn't spoken with Marshal Harrison myself, but seeing how Gordon spoke highly of him, I was sure he was a man of good character.

"However, I cannot declare that all knights abide by this standard."

I could also understand this. During my time with the Imperial Knights, I'd seen several who were only interested in ambition and vanity.

"Unfortunately, even among the Holy Order, there are those who are unsuitable for this knightly standard."

"And Sir Travis is among them?"

"To be specific, he and all those around him," Gordon admitted bitterly. "Those who possess power must have the heart to keep that power in check. It's far easier said than done, though. Those who take on the duty must constantly test themselves, but..."

"He's different?"

"He has great ambition, and to that end, he'll do anything. I've heard many bad rumors. Honestly, I can't really say anything good about his character."

I recalled Travis's bard-like appearance. He hadn't seemed that dangerous to me...but now that I thought of it, I recalled the events of Serrata. I remembered his elegant smile when he watched me speak with Louis. It'd been a smug expression that suited his looks. I remembered something about that smile bothering me at the time.

Back then, I thought that maybe he'd been snickering at the sense of justice Louis and I had displayed, but perhaps there'd been more malice behind that smile than I'd imagined. Seeing me sink deep in thought, Gordon's expression darkened.

"Please do not misunderstand, Miss Iino. There are strays among any group."

"I understand...but why is that kind of person a commander?"

"A vile personality is not enough to strip him of his rank. Also, the bad rumors are just that—rumors. Being from a noble house, he has the influence of his family and is also rather shrewd, so he won't show his true colors all that easily."

Besides...it's true he is an extremely talented knight."

Gordon let out a pained sigh before continuing.

"He is the descendant of the savior who once defeated the Golden Dragon of Darkness. He is known as Sir Travis Mortimer of the Holy Gaze. As a knight of the Holy Order, he is sure to treat a savior with respect, but there's some chance he might do something untoward. Miss lino, please be careful."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Even though I'd forced a topic he didn't really want to talk about, Gordon kindly provided me with a warning. He was a good person. Although, his kindness now might've been a little too late. If Travis had actually been the one to provide Louis and me with false information, stoking the flames of righteous indignation beneath us, I'd already danced to his tune through and through. I felt a sudden unease and clenched my fists tightly.

"Excuse me, Sir Gordon. Do you know what he's doing right now?"

"You want to know what he's up to?" Gordon asked, wide-eyed. "Forgive me. Each company of the Holy Order has a certain amount of authority and acts independently of one another, so we don't always know what the other companies are doing... I heard he was dealing with the aftermath of the incident at Fort Tilia, but I don't know what he's doing now."

"I see."

In this world, communicating over long distances wasn't simple. Because of that, there were many cases where everything was left to the discretion of the officers on site. In fact, even Gordon, who was investigating the fake savior, had been entrusted with all authority over the course of his mission. This meant the same applied to Travis. If he was moving independently for the sake of advancing his career...

Gordon's statement that Travis would do anything remained stuck on my mind.

"Majima..."

Majima was already in an easy-to-misunderstand situation. If one wanted to

pin a crime on him and make him out to be a villain, it would be pretty simple to do. To a person like Travis, who sought glory and honors, Majima and the people around him were the ideal prey.

It was just groundless conjecture, of course. I didn't know where Majima was right now, and I didn't know Travis's whereabouts either. Nonetheless, I just couldn't curb this feeling in my chest.

Chapter 3: Rescue

“The one who shall slay the wretched fallen knight.” I’d heard the name of the man who’d made this declaration before—Travis Mortimer. If I remembered right, Iino had met him in the trade city Serrata. His appearance matched her description, so he was definitely the same man. Furthermore, Shiran had previously told me about the Holy Order.

The Holy Order was composed entirely of knights of blessed blood. Among them were the beloveds of blessed blood, those who’d partially inherited the past saviors’ powers. Travis of the Holy Gaze was one of them, and when I saw how strong the curse he used on Gerbera was, I knew for sure that this was the Holy Gaze Shiran had told me about.

I was certain of one other thing now too. I’d wondered who exactly could be attacking this village. The Akerian army and knights, beloved by the people as they were, would never attack the citizens they were meant to protect. Foreign forces couldn’t recklessly fan the flames of war either. Moreover, if the Holy Church, which maintained public order across the world, viewed the aggressor as problematic, their Holy Order could bring the aggressor to ruin. However, if the Holy Order themselves were attacking, that would be a problem.

“Those features, the Great White Spider, and a girl with flaxen hair... I see, so you’re Majima Takahiro. What great fortune that the Repulsive Ghoul Shiran and the Wicked Monster Tamer are still traveling together.”

By fending off Gerbera, Travis had bought the time he needed to gather his subordinates, who’d been scattered around the village. Surrounded by nearly fifty knights, he continued to speak, his voice getting louder.

“Did you think you could run away forever? If so, I must disappoint you. These filthy knife-ears pretended not to know, but there’s no way they could deceive my eyes.”

The reason the Holy Order had attacked this village was because they were looking to kill Shiran and had suspected that her relatives were sheltering her.

His proud declaration completely missed the mark, though.

“You’re insane...” I groaned.

I’d been too lax about the situation. I never thought hatred and animosity for a monster tamer and a ghoul could be so deeply rooted that it would cloud one’s vision like this. But as I continued to assess things, Travis’s faint smile came into focus, and I instinctively knew that wasn’t the case. This wasn’t a tragedy born of hatred and animosity. There was no such emotion in Travis’s demeanor.

“We glorious knights of the Fourth Company shall be taking your heads,” Travis shouted loudly.

He had a sonorous, singsong voice that matched his outward appearance. He almost looked like an actor standing atop the stage. He labeled Shiran as the Repulsive Ghoul and me as the Wicked Monster Tamer, and bragged about how he would be the one to slay us. Everything in Travis’s tone spoke of his righteous cause and his contempt for us, but there was no hatred or animosity. All I could feel was calculated malice. As proof of that, Travis was totally composed as he announced his decision.

“Although...going at it here would put me at a slight disadvantage,” he said, lowering his sword.

“What? We’re not having at it?” asked one of the knights who’d led some of the scattered knights here, a sharp look in his eyes.

“No, Edgar. We will fall back for now.”

“Oh, come on. We finally found our goddamn prey.”

The man named Edgar pointed his chin my way. He had a foul tongue, and he was acting belligerent, yet I couldn’t sense any hatred or anger from him either. The other knights were all the same, but in this case, that actually made them more terrifying. In other words, a hatred for monsters hadn’t driven this rampage; the violence of pure malice had trampled the village.

I suddenly recalled the time I’d spent with the Alliance Knights. I remembered what the commander had told me one evening in a reclamation village. Even among the knights, whose duty it was to wield their swords for the ideals of

justice and the salvation of the weak, some were desperate for fame, some were depraved, and some were simply bloodthirsty for battle. Now I understood. It described the men before me.

“I won’t tolerate insubordination, Edgar Guivarch,” Travis said with a shake of his head.

“I’ll back down...for now.”

Travis’s tone brooked no argument. Perhaps his cold voice instilled fear in his subordinates. The knights who were eyeing Lily with disgusted looks turned pale. Disregarding whether it was right, fear was a valid form of command. Even Edgar, who looked dissatisfied, obeyed and quickly began retreating. They were fast. I caught only a glimpse of the high standards they had for physical reinforcement through mana.

“You shan’t get away.” Gerbera reflexively tried to pursue them before I could stop her, but they’d expected that.

“Ottmar. Angel Puppets,” Travis said briefly.

“Affirmative,” one of the knights replied flatly, throwing some kind of stone. The moment it hit the ground, light shot up into the air.

“Hrm?!”

Gerbera shouted as twenty naked humans appeared within the light. No, Travis had called them Angel Puppets. They looked human, but they weren’t. None had a single strand of body hair, a smoothness that indicated they were artificial. They had no distinct physical characteristics, so I couldn’t even distinguish them as men or women. Every single one had the exact same face, and each wielded a simple spear.

The Angel Puppets pointed their weapons forward and charged as one.

“Again with the strange tomfoolery!”

Gerbera came to a stop. She was likely thinking about the mysterious attack that Travis had struck her with. Even now, violet patterns ran across her face, highlighting her vigilant expression. Caution forbade her from ignoring these puppets and chasing the knights.

Also, in testament to Travis's horrible personality, the Angel Puppets' glass eyes were fixed on Shiran and me. Seeing that Shiran couldn't move, we had to intercept them. Fortunately, the creepily synchronized charge wasn't all that fast.

"Lily, magic. Gerbera, cut them off."

I stayed back as Shiran's guard while Lily stepped forth and unleashed a preemptive strike with magic. Those that kept charging despite this fell prey to Gerbera's legs. When struck, the puppets shattered like porcelain, their fragments dissolving in the air.

We'd been on guard, but apparently these puppets were nothing more—well, they were somewhat too special for this turn of phrase—than disposable pawns. Taking advantage of the time it took us to strike them all down, the knights retreated and were now far away.

"Grr... They escaped. Shall we give chase, My Lord?" Gerbera asked, looking like she was about to leap at any moment. "I can manage that lot."

Even after facing Travis's Holy Gaze, Gerbera remained stouthearted. We'd been cautious because of the unique attack Travis had displayed from the offset, but it didn't look like any of the other knights had such powerful abilities. Shiran had defeated four of them, even if it had been a surprise attack, so it was unlikely that many of them were on Travis's level.

There were about fifty knights. If that was all, Lily and Gerbera could...

For an instant, a ferocious urge to give chase without thinking of the consequences overcame me. I even bewildered myself with these thoughts. Luckily, right before I impulsively charged into action, I managed to get myself under control.

"No. Don't," I said.

"Why?" Gerbera asked.

"There are still survivors here."

"Mrgh."

Gerbera came to that realization as well as she looked around at the fallen

villagers. Some of them were still breathing. Using the mist's perception magic, I had an accurate count of the number of villagers and the state they were in. Several were sure to die if they didn't receive treatment. For some, it was already too late. I couldn't possibly abandon these villagers, who'd been attacked for a crime that didn't exist. Besides, with Shiran unconscious, someone had to stay with her.

Lily had to treat the villagers, and I had to stay with Shiran. Gerbera was the only one who could take action, but she was still under the effect of Travis's attack, so it was far too dangerous to let her go on her own. We had to leave them be. I could sense all the knights leaving the Misty Lodge's effective range.

"They got away..." I mumbled helplessly.

"No, it's the other way around, Master."

"Lily?"

"They didn't get away. We drove them off. I'm sure that means something," she said, gripping my hand tightly. "So let's do what we can, okay?"

"You're right," I said after a short pause.

It was just as Lily said. By driving away the knights attacking the village, we could now save some of the villagers, even if only a few of them. We'd accomplished something by coming here, so we couldn't let those lives slip through our grasp.

I fired myself up. "Lily, start treating the wounded. Gerbera, go call the others. I'll use the mist to keep an eye out in case Travis's knights come back while we're rescuing survivors."

After I gave out my orders, I got to work. I used perception magic to locate survivors and prioritize their treatment. At the same time, I kept a corner of my mind focused on the possibility that the Holy Order had feigned a retreat and would come back. If they did...

For an instant, a vicious impulse rumbled deep in my chest. I recalled the scene of those knights, who were supposed to have sworn to protect the people, pointing their blades at the villagers. My nails dug into my palms; I'd unconsciously balled my hands into tight fists.

“Master?” Lily asked.

“It’s nothing...”

I sighed as if to spit out the heat accumulating in me. Right now, I had to save as many lives as I could. I returned to my work, but I couldn’t get the throbbing pain in my palms to go away.

Chapter 4: The View from a Certain Knight's Perspective

Within the campsite set up inside the forest sat Zoltan Michalek, a knight belonging to the Fourth Company of the Holy Order. He was off duty, and the other knights around him were all spending the evening however they liked.

Those who were on guard duty remained focused, but everyone else was acting far from well mannered. None of them were fools who'd set aside their weapons, but any sliver of discipline had long since disappeared. Some idiots even sat in circles and gambled.

Seated closest to Zoltan was a man with a terrifyingly sharp gaze. He was one of those who'd attacked the village with Travis, Edgar Guivarch.

"God, what a bummer. You believe we gotta fall back like this?" he muttered, not even trying to hide his dissatisfaction.

"How many times must you complain about that?" Zoltan retorted.

"I mean, what else can I say?"

Zoltan sighed. Edgar had been like this for a while now, but Zoltan was simply how he always was—gloomy. Knightly ambition and soldierly gruffness were foreign concepts to him. Even all his peers thought he was gloomy. Zoltan was well aware of it himself too. Still, he was a glorious knight of the Holy Order, just like them.

Zoltan was the descendant of a savior known as the All-Seeing Eye. He was also a beloved of blessed blood, having inherited his ancestor's superpower. However, his ability was very limited compared to that of his ancestor, who'd helped the Holy Church expand its influence by reading minds. At most, Zoltan could read his target's emotions.

Nevertheless, his ability was fairly useful. For example, he could tell whether his opponent in a fight was angry. By knowing that, he could predict their next move to a certain extent. It was particularly handy against monsters. Also,

during negotiations, he could tell if the other party was hiding malice beneath their smile and trying to swindle him, so it was impossible to trick him.

According to what he discerned with his All-Seeing Eye, Edgar was incredibly frustrated. Well, even without Zoltan's power, everyone could see that. The cause of Edgar's frustration was also obvious. Zoltan had been elsewhere at the time and had only heard about it after the fact, but the main force, including Travis and Edgar, had found their target, the Repulsive Ghoul Shiran.

She hadn't been on her own, though. The Wicked Monster Tamer Majima Takahiro had been with her. This was great for Travis, who could now claim more glory, but on the other hand, the enemy forces had exceeded what they'd been expecting. That was why Travis had gone with the safe approach and had ordered a temporary retreat. That decision had put Edgar in his current grumpy mood.

"We spent so long coming all the way out to the sticks and finally found our target. Now we gotta put it off for later? Of course I wanna bitch and moan about it."

There were three beloveds of blessed blood in the Fourth Company whose superpowers were strong enough to be used in combat. One was the commander, Sir Travis Mortimer of the Holy Gaze. Another was Sir Zoltan Michalek of the All-Seeing Eye. And the third was Battle Ogre Sir Edgar Guivarch.

In combat, Edgar was the strongest. His strength rivaled that of the Holy Order's commanders. His nature was worth far more attention, though.

"What's more, the husk of the former strongest knight of the northern Woodlands ain't even in a state to fight properly. You know how much I was hoping for a good scrap?"

To put it simply, Edgar was a battle maniac. He devoted himself entirely to fighting and had absolutely no interest in anything else. Perhaps that was a very unknighly way to think, but unknighly applied to every single member of the Fourth Company of the Holy Order. If not, they wouldn't have participated in this kind of operation.

The main force that Travis led into battle today had destroyed an entire

village. The chivalrous swords that were originally meant to protect the people had instead mercilessly cut them down. Even an imperfect knight—no, no sensible person would stand for that.

Nonetheless, Zoltan's eyes couldn't spot a single member of the main force suffering from guilt. On the contrary, many of them were highly stimulated. They were a little different from Edgar, who enjoyed the simple act of battle; they enjoyed one-sided violence.

Tyrannizing others was fun. Wielding violence was fun. The majority of the force thought that way. Even those who didn't lacked the disposition to find any fault with such acts. Zoltan fell into the latter group.

Maybe the radiant bloodlines of saviors had eventually turned impure. Or maybe the very thought that saviors were how the legends sang of them was questionable. The people here were so corrupt that Zoltan couldn't help but think that way.

"I need a moment, Edgar. You too, Zoltan."

The most corrupt of them all—by a large margin—called out to the two men. It was their commander, Travis Mortimer. His appearance was elegant, but his heart craved fame and he was driven by ambition. Zoltan's eyes could clearly see Travis's true nature. So clearly, in fact, that he couldn't look at him directly.

"It seems it'll take some time for the others to rendezvous with us," Travis said as he took a look around.

There were around a hundred knights in the area, but the Fourth Company of the Holy Order totaled around two hundred knights. Travis had split his forces to search for the Repulsive Ghoul Shiran's whereabouts, and it would take some time to gather them all together.

"We can't afford fatigue among our ranks. Get some rest while you can."

At first listen, Travis's remark seemed to come from a place of concern, but he treated his subordinates like well-made tools rather than people. Someone who craved battle would naturally worry about the condition of his tools. There was no proper human sympathy behind his words.

"Tomorrow, we will obtain great honor. Although, it may be boring for you,

Edgar.”

“Hmph.”

Edgar snorted, and Travis smiled at him. That smile would send a cold shiver running down anyone’s spine. There was a filthy malice behind it.

“Our enemy is a single visitor, and one whose ability isn’t suited to combat. He’s not even worth our attention.”

To Travis, who didn’t believe in anyone but himself, the visitor Majima Takahiro was not a savior; he was just an alien who’d wandered into this world. Furthermore, he could manipulate monsters, a truly evil power, so any number of excuses would work. Travis would never hesitate to eliminate such a man.

“Those awaiting us are nothing more than weaklings fated to be crushed underfoot. Let’s trample them into the ground, shall we?”

Travis was sure of his victory. That stood to reason, in Zoltan’s opinion. In today’s encounter, Travis had sealed the enemy’s strongest combatant, the giant spider, and the Repulsive Ghoul Shiran was in no state to do battle. With those two down, the enemy was helpless. The knights would kill their targets and slaughter the few surviving villagers. Not that this cruel future moved Zoltan’s heart in the least.

“Look forward to it, you two.”

With that, Travis turned his back to them, but before he did, Zoltan finally met his gaze. On the surface, Travis maintained his refined expression, but a slight discomfort colored the depths of his eyes. It wasn’t just Travis either. The other knights were watching Zoltan and Edgar. Almost all of them regarded Zoltan negatively.

There was no helping that. Even if Zoltan could only read emotions and not thoughts, nobody could substantiate that. The large majority felt disgusted at the idea of being around someone like him, even though it was actually true that he could only read emotions, but Zoltan didn’t really think anything of it.

Zoltan didn’t feel anything. He lived that way on purpose, which was why he was apathetic to everything in the world. No matter how cruel reality was, nothing could move his heart. That was the kind of man Zoltan Michalek was.

“Seriously, how incorrigible,” Zoltan muttered to himself.

“What’s up, Zoltan?” Edgar asked with a dubious look, apparently overhearing him.

There was no emotion in his words aside from curiosity, none of the animosity the other knights felt for Zoltan. Having said that, there was nothing close to affection either. This man had no interest in anything but fighting and was merely indifferent toward everything else.

“It’s nothing,” Zoltan answered.

“If you say so. If you’re feeling out of it, then get outta here. You get in my way, and I’ll kill you despite our long acquaintance.”

“I know.”

Around that time, the knights on lookout started to get noisy. Knights who’d been searching elsewhere were linking back up with the group. The time for battle was drawing nearer. Morale was high. Travis was going around claiming that victory and honor were a guarantee.

Morale was tremendously important to any armed force, and Travis excelled at manipulating it. Setting aside his personality, he was a talented commander.

Ambition, greed, and sadism. These desires driving the men burned like a blaze in Zoltan’s eyes. The flame only grew stronger and would surely grant them strength. Zoltan was the only one looking at these greed-spurred men with cold eyes. Perhaps because of this, an absurd thought crossed his mind.

Travis had claimed that their opponents were no more than “weaklings fated to be crushed underfoot.” Travis frequently trampled over others, so in this regard, his intuition was right. But was that an absolute and undeniable truth?

There was no guarantee that weaklings would forever stay weaklings. The slightest of doubts came to Zoltan’s mind. It was nothing more than a trivial and worthless anxiety, and even if it wasn’t, it didn’t matter to Zoltan. Just as soon as the thought came to him, it vanished entirely.

The night went on, and the time to crush the weaklings steadily drew nearer.

Chapter 5: The Wounded

I woke up to the sight of an unassuming room. I was staying in a house that had escaped the Holy Order's destruction. It was just before dawn, and light was starting to fill the room. I'd just seen Shiran lying in a bed next to mine when Asarina suddenly jumped into sight.

"Ssster?"

She tilted her Venus-flytrap-like head and started play-biting my ear.



It felt itchy, so I reflexively tucked my neck, and the gears of my consciousness began moving again.

“Mm... Oh. That’s what’s going on.”

I got up from bed and came out into the hallway.

“Oh. Takahiro.”

“Morning, Kei.”

Kei, who’d been headed toward my room from the hallway, looked surprised.

“Did you bring breakfast?” I asked.

“Yes. I was thinking of checking if you were awake first... Did I maybe wake you up?”

“Not really. Asarina woke me up. To be precise, I had her wake me up. I asked her to keep a watch on our surroundings in case something happened while I was asleep.”

“Masss—ter!”

I gave Asarina a wry smile as she slithered about in the air proudly. Then Kei gave me my meal. Given the circumstances, it was a simple breakfast made up of whatever was available.

“Umm. If you’d rather rest a bit more, I could bring it by later,” Kei said.

“It’s fine. It’s better to eat while I can.”

I took a bite out of the manju-like bun made from potato flour particular to this region. I chewed on its elastic texture and drank it down with some water. It was then that I noticed Kei’s eyes.

“How about you, Kei? Are you all right? You haven’t slept, have you?”

“I’m no use in battle, after all.”

I reached out and tidied up her unkempt hair. Kei closed her eyes and let me do as I pleased for a short while.

“Ssster?” Asarina purred.

Sensing someone approaching, I stopped what I was doing. A male elf and

several children appeared down the hallway. After meeting my eyes, the man brought the children my way.

“My apologies for disturbing your rest, sir,” he said.

“Is something the matter, Dennis?” I asked.

He was one of the villagers who’d miraculously escaped the Holy Order’s blades. He was very cooperative with us, and thanks to him, I had a general idea of what had happened here. According to what he’d said before I took a nap, the Holy Order had started by making the villagers disarm themselves and gather in one place.

The people of Aker—men, women, children, the elderly—all walked about armed to varying degrees. Despite the obvious difference in combat experience compared to the knights, the villagers had likely judged it imprudent to resist and put up a fight.

The Holy Order hadn’t suffered a single casualty aside from the knights who’d fought Shiran. I’d found it strange that there’d been no evidence of any villagers resisting, but that was because they’d been prevented from doing so from the start.

However, the villagers had sensed something wrong during all this. Aker bordered the Woodlands, so danger was always close by. It was part of their everyday lives, so the residents of reclamation villages were particularly sensitive to danger. They couldn’t refuse the Holy Order’s demands, but they’d realized it would be dangerous to meekly obey them too. On the spur of the moment, they’d hidden all the children in their houses, an order that came from Shiran’s uncle, the village chief.

By using the Misty Lodge’s perception magic, I’d found all of the children one by one. Some had been in precarious positions because of the burning houses, but I’d somehow made it in time.

Meanwhile, I’d ordered the others, who’d been hiding in the manamobile, to go around collecting any surviving villagers. After gathering them all, Lily had continued casting healing magic until her mana ran dry. The rest of us had had nothing on our hands, so we’d spent the time running around stopping people from bleeding out as best we could.

Lives had been at stake. Time had passed in a flurry. By the time we treated who we could, the sun had set completely. Thanks to Lily's magic, we saved many lives, but we couldn't save them all. Some were still alive, but their condition was uncertain. These next few days were going to be the most critical. I wanted to save even just one more life if possible, but at this point, all I could do was pray.

"M-Mister Takahiro," one of the children said.

They were all shy of ten years old, making them just a little younger than Kei.

"What is it?" I asked.

The children exchanged glances and timidly looked my way. Somehow, their reaction reminded me of how Kei had acted when we met.

Unable to stand by and watch them, Dennis spoke in their stead. "I must apologize for these children, sir. How is Lady Shiran doing?"

They'd apparently come here to find out how she was doing. Unfortunately, I couldn't provide them the answer they wanted to hear.

"She hasn't woken up yet..."

I turned to look at the room I came out of. We were connected by the mental path, so I had the best grasp of Shiran's current condition and could deal with any problems. For that reason, I'd stayed with her while I got some rest, but even after half a day, she remained unconscious and out of mana. I'd soaked her mouth in my own blood a few times while she slept and had managed to recuperate a small amount of her mana. I wanted to believe that she would eventually recover, but...

"Is that so...?" Dennis said with a sigh before lowering his head deeply.

"Mister Takahiro, now that the Holy Church has declared us heretics, we have nobody else to turn to. Please take care of Lady Shiran," he said, grief-stricken.

"I... Yeah. I'll do everything I can."

Dennis, haggard with anxiety, raised his head and smiled at me ever so slightly. He was so desperate that even my empty words were enough for him. It also showed that he worried about Shiran from the bottom of his heart. I felt

somewhat relieved to see him like this; that was something I'd worried about myself, after all.

I'd feared that, with the Holy Order targeting Shiran, some of the villagers would blame her for all of this. The knights were, of course, in the wrong, and Shiran was nothing more than a victim. Pinning the responsibility on her would be unreasonable. Still, people often acted unreasonably. A cornered human's weakness would come to the fore.

Thankfully, Dennis and the few survivors of the village didn't blame Shiran. Or at least, I hadn't seen any signs of it. That was when I came to a realization. In their minds, this hadn't happened *because* of Shiran. They'd been attacked, *including* Shiran. In short, they were family. The reason they treated me favorably, despite the fact that monsters accompanied me, was in part because I'd saved them, but it was largely because of my relationship with their family members, Shiran and Kei.

The elves of the reclamation villages understood the value of bonds. They were the weak, crushed underfoot by the strong, but they also had stout hearts. Perhaps it was this environment that had fostered Shiran's nobility. Nevertheless, these same elves were on the verge of a major crisis.

"What's the best thing we can do...?" I wondered.

After Dennis, the children, and Kei left, I returned to the room where Shiran was resting and started thinking about our next move. Fortunately, the Holy Order had yet to launch an attack.

I'd kept the Misty Lodge up to keep an eye on our surroundings until I eventually had to get some sleep. While I'd been napping, Leah, who'd recovered from the emotional shock, and Lily, who was waiting for her mana to recover, were supposed to be on watch in my stead.

It was hard to believe that the Holy Order would stay their hand much longer. What was the best thing to do? I continued to ponder that question when a voice suddenly called out to me.

"Takahiro..."

Shiran, still lying in bed, opened her eye.

“Shiran?!” I gasped, at a loss for breath. “You’re awake?!”

“Yes.”

This was the first time she’d opened her eyes since running out of mana yesterday.

“Where is this?” she asked. “Actually, what happened to me?” Shiran closed her eye, combing her memories. “Oh, right. I saw the village under attack, and then...”

“So you remember?”

“Up until I lost myself and went on a rampage. From the looks of it, I ran out of mana and became immobile.”

Even though she was physically weaker now, she hadn’t lost the experience she’d built up as a knight. She was calm despite just regaining consciousness.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked.

“About half a day. I’m so glad you came back to us.”

I walked up to Shiran’s side, lowered myself to one knee, and took a close look at her face. Her voice was so weak that I could barely hear her without doing this. She’d regained consciousness, but she was definitely still debilitated.

“Do you...want blood?” I asked.

“No. I’m grateful for the offer, but there isn’t much point. Takahiro, you can tell, can’t you?”

Her voice was frail, but her tone still quietly admonished me. I understood instinctively that she was right. Shiran’s body already absorbed very little mana to begin with, but her symptoms had gotten worse now, and she could absorb almost nothing.

An undead monster’s mental state greatly influenced their body. Shiran’s spirit had been so beat down that she couldn’t even maintain her own body. Her vessel was cracked, and only a little water remained at the very bottom.

“What happened to the village...?”

Even in such a state, the first thing on her mind was the safety of others.

Consequently, I couldn't keep it from her.

"According to what I heard..."

I went on to tell her about what had happened after she'd lost consciousness, including what Dennis had told me.

"That's everything."

"I see. Because the Holy Order was chasing me..."

Shiran fell silent; it was a difficult situation for her to swallow. Time wouldn't wait, though.

"Sorry, Shiran. I want to get things in order. Can I get your thoughts?"

She had experience as a lieutenant of the Alliance Knights, so she had some knowledge regarding the Holy Order. Her opinion had great value.

"First, do you think this incident is backed by the entire Holy Order?" I asked.

"I can't say for certain..." Shiran answered, averting her eye. "But I think that's unlikely."

"Can you tell me why?"

"The knights who did this were far too violent. I've yet to meet him in person, but the Holy Order's marshal, Sir Harrison Addington, and its vice marshal, Sir Gordon Cavill, have terrific reputations. They are both knights of great repute. Besides..."

Shiran blinked slowly as if remembering the past.

"I heard this during my time in the Alliance Knights," she continued. "The commander was acquainted with them."

"How did they meet?"

"Several years ago, the Holy Order's First Company visited Fort Tilia. It was when my brother was still alive. The commander rated them highly, saying, 'Those are true knights.' I find it hard to believe that people like that would attack civilians."

"I see."

Travis's force was just one of the Holy Order's four companies. It would be too hasty to label the entire order based on what we'd seen from this one company.

"Meaning we can assume that Travis started this incident of his own accord?" I asked.

"That's what I believe."

"So we haven't made an enemy of the entire Holy Order. That's good, at least..." I said, knitting my brow. "But in that case, it will be hard to convince them to stop the attack."

"It will be. From what you've told me, Travis of the Holy Gaze didn't act out of righteous indignation. It would be difficult to undo any misunderstandings and reconcile like we did with the Skanda Yuna."

Say this incident had all happened because the Holy Order considered me a dangerous individual. In that case, we might have reached a compromise like we had with Iino. However, if Travis was doing this out of malice for the sake of fame and glory, then that wouldn't fly. It would be useless to claim that I wasn't evil and that Shiran wasn't dangerous despite being undead.

Travis carried the just cause of subjugating the Wicked Monster Tamer and the Repulsive Ghoul, but that was nothing more than an excuse. The truth didn't really matter. If that was their stance, then I could understand why they attacked the village. If the villagers were in cahoots with me, then the knights were justified in murdering them. If the villagers weren't, then dead men told no tales.

"Reconciliation is impossible. That said, we can't run away either," I remarked, throwing out ideas as they came up. "Several villagers are on the verge of death. We can't escape with them."

It would be hard to move them when they needed bed rest, let alone move them quickly.

"The only choice is to strike back..." I muttered. Battle was inevitable. I clenched my fists.

But unlike me, Shiran remained calm. Unnaturally calm, in fact.

“No. There’s a way to avoid battle,” she said.

Her voice had no strength behind it, but there was still a powerful glint in her eye. Her expression was that of someone resolving themselves for death.

“I have a request,” she said. “I will stay behind in the village. Takahiro, please take everyone capable of moving and run away.”

Chapter 6: Necessities

“Travis said, ‘Going at it here would put me at a slight disadvantage,’ and, ‘We will fall back for now.’ In that case, he’ll come back once his preparations are done.”

Shiran was quietly explaining her thoughts from her bed.

“The knights we encountered weren’t the entire company. The Fourth Company of the Holy Order is two hundred strong. In all likelihood, they split their forces to search for me. I’m sure they deemed fifty or so knights sufficient to take me down as long as I was on my own. But you were with me, Takahiro. Therefore, I believe they withdrew for the moment to gather a force strong enough to guarantee victory.”

There was no room to interject. I was of the same opinion.

“Travis spoke as if he already knew about Lily and Gerbera,” she continued. “Ergo, he must know that your ability isn’t fit for the battlefield like the Skanda Yuna’s is. The Holy Order won’t run away in fear because of your presence, so if Travis comes back after withdrawing once already...it means he’ll bring sufficient forces to defeat a visitor. He should know how strong a visitor’s ability is. I don’t doubt his judgment.”

Shiran fervently conveyed the danger of the situation to me.

“Some among the villagers can be moved. There are children too. Takahiro, please take them with you and run away.”

“And what do you plan on doing? You mentioned staying behind.”

“I’m Travis’s target. If I remain here, the rest of you can avoid danger.”

“Do you plan on dying?”

“Either way, my body won’t hold out much longer.”

Shiran’s arm trembled as she raised it slightly, but she could only raise it so far before it fell back down on the bed.

“Takahiro, you’re aware that my symptoms have worsened again, aren’t you?”

“Yeah...”

In truth, Shiran’s body was weaker than ever. The attack on the village had already severely damaged her mental state, and the fact that we couldn’t even protect the remaining survivors weakened her even further.

If, for argument’s sake, we were to abandon the villagers who couldn’t be moved, then my group and a portion of the elves, including Shiran, could get away. However, abandoning any of the villagers would break Shiran’s heart. If her symptoms got any worse, both her body and her heart would reach their limits.

“There is no future for me as I am,” she said. “I’d at least like to help by buying time.”

An intense aura enveloped Shiran. She’d lost pretty much all her mana and could hardly lift a limb, but there was a sharpness about her like a drawn blade.

“Takahiro, thanks to you, I have the bare minimum of mana I need. If I burn myself out completely, I should be able to fight for a short time.”

I agreed. Even with Shiran’s reduced mana, she could probably manifest her full fighting strength for an explosive moment. All that awaited her down this path was ruin, though. It would be like boarding a runaway train with no brakes. Once aboard, there was no going back. And here she was, ticket already in hand.

“I’ll pay them back tenfold...”

On the surface, Shiran appeared tranquil, but beneath that was the ferocious aura of a ghoul. As she was now, she could certainly transform and fight the Holy Order. An emotional flame flickered in her blue eye, and the rage she felt from seeing her countrymen slaughtered so cruelly burned bright in her heart. She was preparing for one last battle by using her desire for revenge as fuel to turn into a ghoul. It was very unknighly, but I couldn’t blame her for it. Right now, Shiran wasn’t a knight; she was just a girl.

“You’re right,” I said as calmly as I could, trying not to let her fervor influence

me. “If you stay behind as a decoy, we might escape to safety. But...do you really think I’ll allow that?”

“I...” Shiran’s spirit wavered for the first time, and she averted her gaze. “There’s nothing left in me. If I can be of use, then what more can I hope for?”

“Like hell that’s true,” I said as I leaned in and grabbed Shiran’s shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “I already told you this before. Causing us trouble, being of use—none of that matters. All that matters is that you’re here with us, Shiran.”

I hadn’t lied about that when Shiran had anguished over her undead body.

“It’s fine if you can’t fight,” I continued. “You’re not a knight anymore. You’re just another girl.”

For the sake of her comrades in arms, her powerless countrymen, and the many people living in this world, Shiran had always fought for others. Even during the incident at Fort Tilia, she’d protected me from Juumonji with her devotion. As a result, she’d turned into an undead and lost her strength as a knight. Now that she had nearly no strength left, I couldn’t possibly leave the fighting to her. My mind was already made up.

“Please leave the fighting to us,” I said.

We would meet the Holy Order in battle. That was the only path before us. The difference between me and Shiran was that I refused to lose anyone at all. So long as we could protect this village, Shiran wouldn’t suffer any further emotional damage. It would also stop her body from weakening, seeing as how it was heavily influenced by her mental state.

“Takahiro...”

I wondered how my determination rang in her ears. She remained silent, her shoulders still in my grasp, and stared at my face with her one eye as if drawn to me. Her pale lips quivered, then formed a clumsy smile.

“Aah... That is just like you, Takahiro,” she said, looking like she was going to cry. “Why do you go so far?”

“Huh?”

“If I sacrifice myself, you can escape this danger,” she said, her expression dead serious. “So, why?”

There was an echo of hope behind her words. She normally seemed mature for her age, but now she seemed unusually childish. It was a completely different side of her compared to her knightly dignity.

Her sweetness captivated my senses, and I became more aware of the presence of her body through her cold shoulders. Her earnest eye enraptured mine. My heart was mesmerized by a warm sensation. I felt like I’d discovered some special feeling in her...

“I—”

“Oh, I suppose you already answered that too, huh?” Shiran said before I could give my response any shape. Her tone was serious, but it had a slight wryness to it. “Companionship. You consider me one of your companions, right?”

“Y-Yeah. You’re a precious companion.”

That was the truth, so I nodded along, but I didn’t know whether that would’ve been my answer. Shiran’s brow drooped as she smiled. Her expression, half-hidden by her eyepatch, no longer held any of that special emotion I’d glimpsed a second before. All there was now was absolute trust in someone she respected.

“I’m honored. I also think of you as a dear companion, Takahiro.”

“Thanks...”

I returned her smile, truly happy from the bottom of my heart to hear that.

“Leave the rest to us,” I said, steadily rising to my feet.

With that, I left the room and closed the door behind me, only to immediately meet someone’s eyes.

“Master.”

“Salvia?”

She’d manifested at some point and had been waiting for me in the hallway.

She looked astonished, and she even sighed at me.

“Both you and Shiran are a little *too* serious.”

Her statement left me utterly bewildered.



“Ssster.”

Asarina, who’d remained quiet the entire time I was talking with Shiran, happily started playing with Salvia. There was a bond between them as fellow roommates inside my body, and they got along really well.

“You’re going to fight the Holy Order, aren’t you?” Salvia asked as she let Asarina twine around her. Salvia had apparently come out to confirm my decision. “Lying in wait in this village, striking out at the knights... You plan on making enemies of the Holy Order, and even the Holy Church behind them.”

Salvia was normally very gentle and relaxed, but given the situation, she couldn’t hide her tension. She’d assumed too much, though.

“No. The Holy Church won’t necessarily be our enemy.”

“What do you mean?” Salvia asked with a cock of her head. “The Holy Order has already attacked this village.”

“No. Travis’s company attacked the village, not the Holy Order itself.”

I’d learned this from my conversation with Shiran. Repelling Travis’s company could damage relations with the Holy Order, of course, but from what Shiran had told me, Travis’s cowardly behavior differed from the standards of the Holy Order as a whole. At the very least, it would be easier to open a dialogue with them than with Travis. All the same, this was something to consider *after* we managed to repel Travis. We couldn’t do anything until we handled the problem before us.

“The Holy Order is mighty,” I continued. “If they treat us as their enemy, we honestly don’t have a chance. But if it’s just Travis, it’s a different matter.”

“I see.” Salvia nodded, then knit her brow. “But you’re still facing two hundred knights. What’s more, your strongest combatant, Gerbera, has been sealed.”

“There’s another way to look at it. Their strongest combatant is also sealed,” I said with confidence. “He debilitated Gerbera. I have to admit his Holy Gaze is terrifyingly fiendish, but it isn’t absolute.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because he didn’t cast it on all of us at the time.”

“Ummm...?” Salvia cocked her head again and blinked. “What do you mean?”

“If his power can weaken Gerbera, then it would definitely work on the rest of us. There’s no way it wouldn’t. If so, he could’ve just weakened our entire group. He didn’t have to fall back and regroup. He could’ve just killed us all then and there. Right?”

“Well...” Salvia put her hand to her mouth and sank into thought. “You have a point. Now that you put it that way, it does seem strange.”

“Furthermore, say he wanted to be doubly sure, so he decided to withdraw first. Why, then, didn’t he debilitate all of us anyway? Travis had no reason to leave us unscathed, yet he retreated without doing anything more.”

“Because he couldn’t use the Holy Gaze anymore?” Salvia asked, a light of understanding in her eyes.

“That’s the gist of it.”

One had to maintain reinforcement and debilitation magics, or their effects would vanish. It was the same for Travis’s Holy Gaze. The Great White Spider of the Depths was no easy prey. A bona fide savior would be one thing, but a simple descendant like Travis would struggle to put another target under his spell while maintaining the effect on Gerbera. I’d confirmed this with Gerbera herself, so there was no mistaking it. If he loosened his hold even just a little, the Great White Spider would immediately tear off her shackles.

“Travis is a beloved of blessed blood and one of the strongest knights in the Holy Order, but in a way, Gerbera has sealed his trump card. Naturally, he didn’t hesitate to use his power on Gerbera because he knew she was our strongest fighter. However, if he thinks that’s enough to beat us, then he’ll pay for his miscalculation.”

After parting with Salvia, I made my way to my closest servants using the mental path as a guide. I had to consult everyone and prepare for the attack. I'd made my resolve. I had a chance at victory. If there was one thing I still needed...

"Rose, I'm coming in."

I knocked and opened the door to a room as Rose and Katou turned toward me from inside.

"Aah, Master. I see you're awake. Good morning."

"Rose...?"

I was a little surprised. All the furniture in the room had been put away, creating an open space. Rose sat in the middle, a line of ten spare right arms in front of her. It seemed she was in the middle of doing some maintenance. And that wasn't all. There were all sorts of other goods lying around, all tools and magic items she'd made. It was obvious to me why she had these all out right now.

"I have been preparing for battle while you rested, Master."

"Rose said that you'd decide to fight, Senpai," Katou added, carrying imitation runestones in her arms to help out.

"It wasn't just me," Rose said, staring right into my eyes. "My sisters have all begun doing what they can."

"I see."

A smile suddenly came to me. I looked Rose directly in the eyes and took her hand. She'd taken off her gloves to work, so her wooden limbs were exposed. I wrapped both my hands around hers.

"Thanks," I said.

"Of course." Rose nodded, looking delighted.

I then shifted my gaze to her best friend, who was watching us with a faint smile.

"Katou, are you fine with this?" I asked.

“Well, to be honest, I’d prefer you prioritize your own safety...” she started, a mature yet wry grin on her childish face. “Senpai, you said you’d create a place in this world where you can live with everyone, right? To that end, this battle is unavoidable. Leah and Helena have accepted you. All the other elves have too. I’m sure this chance will never come again. There is great meaning in protecting this village’s elves now that they’re our friends.”

Katou had spoken logically up until now, but she added one last thing.

“Please do what you think is best, Senpai.”

Katou also gave me a push on the back. Everyone understood and supported me, which made me happy. They were all so reliable.

“Let’s fight,” I said, free from all misgivings. “We’ll meet Travis in battle.”

Thus, we immediately started preparing to launch our counterattack.

Chapter 7: And/Or

In the early afternoon, I found myself in a room of a certain building. Among the charred remains of the village's residences, it was the sturdiest one. The surviving elves were gathered inside, and Shiran was sleeping in another room.

In other words, it was our last line of defense. Thinking of it like that made my chest feel heavy. I'd played out every scenario that had come to mind, but there was no guarantee everything would go well.

"All that's left is to believe in the others... Hm?"

I clenched my fists atop the table in front of me and turned toward the room's entrance. I heard footsteps drawing nearer and, after several seconds, knocking at the door.

"Come in," I said.

"Excuse me."

It was Helena. She was supposed to be with her grandmother Leah nursing the villagers, but right now, she was wearing her leather armor with a sword hanging at her waist. Even though I wouldn't allow our enemies to get this far, considering the situation, it wasn't a bad idea to prepare for battle just in case. Her expression bothered me, though.

"What is it, Helena? Did something happen?" I asked.

"No, nothing happened or anything," she answered stiffly.

"That's good," I said, a little curious about her behavior. "How are the villagers doing?"

"They're calm. Kei talked to them."

"She did?"

Now that I thought of it, with Shiran out of commission, Kei was the only one of the village chief's family who could move about. She was very reliable for her age, so she was probably looking for something she could do to help. I was

honestly grateful that she was helping me with things I couldn't get around to.

"What are the others doing?" Helena asked.

"They're busy with the jobs I gave them." My servants were the same in that they were doing what they could. "They're working to defend the village."

"Is that so? Everyone is trying so hard," Helena said before giving me a determined look. "Mister Takahiro, please let me fight with you."

"Out of the question," I answered immediately.

"Why?!"

"I will not make any unnecessary sacrifices."

Helena was pretty skilled with a sword. She could even put up a fight against the Empire's regular soldiers. Be that as it may, she was nowhere close to being able to fight a knight of the Holy Order. The best she could hope for was injuring someone on her way down. It was far more likely she'd die without accomplishing anything.

"I'm resolved," Helena said. She'd predicted I'd be against this, so she didn't back down so easily. "I'll at least take a single arm or eye with me."



Her words were befitting of Aker's militaristic spirit. Thinking back on it, Shiran had told me something similar before.

"I said it's out of the question," I repeated, shaking my head. She tried to say something else, but I cut her off. "If you die, Shiran will be beyond recovery. I can't allow that, and you don't wish for it either, do you?"

"B-But..."

"Besides, I don't think you can fight properly right now."

I'd noticed her trembling fists ever since she entered the room. She was pale too. She was in no condition to fight. Having said that, I didn't mean to make light of Helena's resolve. Her trembling wasn't a display of fear, but rather her determination.

However, the people of this world couldn't fight the Holy Order. I recalled Dennis's grief-stricken expression from being cornered. From what I could see, the other villagers were much the same.

To the people of this world, saviors were the light of hope, the pillars that gave them the spiritual support to keep on living. The people had faith in saviors. The Holy Church raised these saviors up high, and the Holy Order fought by their side. As a result, these organizations were representatives of the saviors' authority. They were the very symbol of righteousness.

Simply put, the devout believers had excommunicated the villagers and judged them as sinners in their god's name. It wasn't an exaggeration to say they were denying the villagers' very existence. The shock they must've felt could never be understood by someone who didn't live the way they did, only capable of surviving with faith as their support.

The only thing they could do was try to make excuses. Pointing their swords at the Holy Order would be absurd. If anyone in this world was capable of fighting them, they would have to have unwavering resolve, staunch conviction, or an unshakeable sense of justice.

In truth, just speaking of fighting them must have caused an inordinate amount of conflict in Helena's heart. In such a state, she wouldn't actually be able to fight.

She knew I was right, so she dropped her unreasonable request. Instead, she asked in a helpless, trembling voice, “Can you win...?”

I knew all of the survivors in the village were harboring the same anxiety, so I nodded firmly.

“It’s okay. We have a chance.”

Just this once, I pretended the tension that had been running through me moments ago didn’t exist. I felt like I had to. The words I spoke to bring her peace of mind weren’t a lie either.

“I’ve thought of a way to get through this.”

I’d decided to protect the villagers. To that end, I was going to do absolutely everything I could. Katou had told me that this was an unavoidable battle, and I completely agreed. We had to make a place in this world that would accept us. My heart was set on it. It wasn’t only about being accepted, though. The number of things we’d have to protect would multiply. The responsibilities on my shoulders would grow heavier. That was what it meant to live in this world, and I couldn’t run away from it.

“They’ve severely miscalculated,” I added. “If we take advantage of that, we can win.”

I would exhaust everything I’d fostered up to this day to avoid losing even one more life.

“Mister Takahiro...” Helena gulped. After a few seconds, she caught her breath. “Very well.”

I wasn’t sure whether my words were enough for her, but her stiff expression relaxed a bit.

“You really are worthy of Shiran’s recognition,” she added happily. “I’m sorry for intruding, sir. I will convey your words to everyone else.”

She quickly bowed and turned on her heels.

“Wait a moment, Helena,” I called before she ran off. Once she turned back to me, I said, “I have something I want to ask you too. The night we stayed in Rapha, when you noticed Shiran’s strange behavior in that storehouse, why did

you so readily leave everything to me?”

Back then, I'd had to chase after Shiran as soon as possible, so I hadn't given Helena an explanation. Nevertheless, she'd left Shiran to me and cleaned up the storehouse in the meantime. I wondered why that was. I'd lost the chance to ask her back then, so I figured now was as good a time as any.

“Oh, that? It's because Shiran acknowledges you,” she answered immediately. “She strongly believes in herself as a knight, so even when she's suffering, she won't tell anyone. A knight cannot feel any pain, so she just makes a face like it's nothing.”

Helena clenched her fist in front of her chest as if she found this vexing.

“That's why I was surprised when she came back to the village,” she continued. “For *that* Shiran to trust someone else with her own problems? It was unthinkable. I mean, she even asked you to stand in for her for our duel, right? It's the same thing. The Shiran I know hates troubling others above all else, yet she relied on you as if it were perfectly natural. That's why.”

“Helena...you understand Shiran well, huh?” I said, sighing with relief.

Helena blinked in confusion, then blushed and averted her eyes.

“N-Not really,” she protested. “It's just always bugged me to see someone act all cool and say nothing even when they're in pain...”

So she said, but I wondered about that. Why did Shiran's behavior bother her? When I looked at it like that, Helena's attitude was easy to understand. Her fabricated sour look and intentional slander brought an amused smile to my face.

“Personally, I think it's pretty impressive that you understand her,” I said, but then my smile turned bitter. “I only managed to realize that recently.”

I'd always watched Shiran the knight, yet I hadn't noticed the girl within all this time. Helena was a true childhood friend.

“Even though Shiran is a girl before she's a knight...” I added in self-derision.

Seeing me like this, Helena's eyes widened.

“She's not, though?” she said dubiously.

“Huh?” I stared back in wonder, caught off guard by her remark.

“She’s a knight,” Helena declared. “Hopelessly so, in fact. No matter what happens, that will never change.”

I never thought I’d hear it like that. But, at the same time, Helena’s words just clicked. It made sense. I’d been so focused on Shiran as a knight that I hadn’t seen her as a girl. That was why I’d decided to treat her as a girl from now on rather than a knight. However, even though she was a girl, it didn’t stop her from being a knight or anything. I had been wrong to question which one was her true nature. She was a knight *and* a girl. If that was the simple truth, then...

“She is a knight. Please don’t forget that.”

The words I’d once been told rang in my ears again.

“Commander... Is this what you meant?”

“Mister Takahiro?”

I finally realized the true meaning behind the commander’s words when she’d entrusted Shiran to me back on that night in the reclamation village.

“Takahiro!”

Just then, the door flew open and Leah came in. She looked like she was at her wits’ end, and behind her, her contracted spirit flailed its little limbs about vigorously. Even without the spirit’s warning, I could guess what was going on based on Leah’s expression.

“The knights are here!”

Chapter 8: The Counterattack Begins

“Commander Travis. Word from the scouts.”

In the dense thickets of the forest, a messenger called out to Travis.

“There are no signs that Majima Takahiro has left the village,” he reported.

“Is that so?” Travis elegantly cupped his chin and nodded in satisfaction.

“Everything is going in our favor. All that’s left is to reap the harvest. Inform them that there are no changes to their orders.”

“Sir!”

After the messenger left, Zoltan turned his cold eyes toward Travis.

“Just as you predicted, Majima Takahiro hasn’t fled,” he said.

“Oh? You speak as if it would’ve been better for him to run away,” Travis replied with an exaggerated shrug. “What’s wrong, Zoltan? Is this sympathy I hear?”

“As if,” Zoltan responded immediately. “I can’t feel sympathy,” he added without hesitation, his tone bone-chilling. “I merely find it strange that he hasn’t.”

“It isn’t all that strange. Didn’t I tell you? He’s a weakling meant to be crushed underfoot.” Travis let out a hearty laugh and sneered with ridicule, revealing the wicked nature that his elegant behavior usually hid. “I’m sure he couldn’t abandon the villagers. He’s so weak. Don’t you find him and his act frail?”

Zoltan fell silent for a moment. He believed it was a foolish decision, but he also found it to be a noble deed. Saying that wouldn’t amount to anything, though, and it would be simple hypocrisy. Zoltan was among those who were about to attack the village, after all. For this reason, he decided not to continue on the topic and talked about something else.

“Despite constantly calling him weak, you’ve plotted and schemed quite a bit to take him on.”

Zoltan looked around him. Twenty knights were in sight, about ten percent of their total forces. As for where the others were...

“It’s just for caution’s sake,” Travis said with an air of superiority.

Travis hadn’t shown an ounce of negligence. Even though he was certain of victory—or rather, to make victory certain—he’d formed his strategy with cold calculation. Unless Majima Takahiro knew of Travis’s plans, he would have no way of dealing with them. Nonetheless, if there was one thing still bothering Zoltan...

“Oh come on, Zoltan. You always overthink things.”

A voice cut off Zoltan’s thoughts. Edgar, who’d been listening quietly up until now, was smiling, a rare sight on his sharp features. It was strange for him to give a damn about anyone else. Perhaps that simply reflected his great mood and how hopeful he was for the upcoming battle.

“Right...” Zoltan replied.

“Commander Travis,” another voice said. “All preparations are complete.”

“Good,” Travis replied with a twisted grin to the new messenger pushing his way through the thickets. “Now, then. It’s time to trample the weaklings.”

With that declaration, the knights surrounding him raised their swords to the sky. Among them, only Zoltan lowered his eyes to the ground.



Exultant knights proceeded through the forest down the path to the village. Morale was high. The mood was festive. They could already see the sweet fruit of victory that had been promised to them.

They were, of course, the most unimportant of knights. They knew full well that any battle came with sacrifice. But what of it? Sacrifices were sure to be made, but that didn’t matter so long as it wasn’t them. They didn’t care how many of their comrades died. Even though they’d become highly skilled in group tactics through training, it hadn’t fostered any bonds among them. If necessary, they would use the comrade at their side as a shield.

“I can see it now,” one of the knights said.

The village's defensive walls were coming into view.

“That’s...”

A single figure stood directly above the gate—a girl with ashen hair. She was wearing a maid's outfit and wielding a large axe that contrasted with her lovely appearance. If they hadn't known better, this would've looked like some kind of joke. These knights didn't react as if it were, though. The scouts had already informed them of this.

They marched on, but Travis wasn't among them. Considering the size of the whole Fourth Company, this group wasn't all that big. Why was that? Showing no indication of whether she found this inexplicable, Rose watched the knights drawing nearer, her eyes tranquil all the while.



On the other side of the village, opposite from where the knights were marching straight toward the front gates, another group of knights pushed their ways through the thickets, using the foliage to cover their advance.

“I’m guessing the ‘main force’ should be arriving at the gates soon,” one of them said. He sneered, clearly making fun of his comrades. The way he'd said “main force” had been filled with wicked intent. “Seriously, Commander Travis has a terrible personality. Those guys probably have no idea they're a decoy.”

The knights marching straight toward the village weren't the entire Fourth Company. Travis had split his forces again. The group marching through the forest was a detached force...or rather, the actual main force of this strategy.

If attacked from the front, Majima Takahiro's servants would be forced to sally out and take the attackers head-on. However, Majima Takahiro's power as a visitor wasn't suited to direct combat. He would surely choose to remain in the safety of the village rather than brave a dangerous battlefield. The detached force's role was to gain entry into the village from a different angle and launch a surprise attack on him.

It didn't matter how many monsters they defeated. There was no meaning to their attack unless they took the heads of the Wicked Monster Tamer and the Repulsive Ghoul. Travis had emphasized this many times over.

Being certain of victory and achieving great deeds were different matters altogether. For example, if his servants suffered a crushing defeat, Majima Takahiro might flee the village in fear. At the very least, that was what Travis would do. He would use those monsters as sacrificial pawns and leave immediately. That was why he'd chosen this strategy.

The knights of the detached force, a gathering of people who sympathized with such behavior, understood this. Depending on the circumstances, the "main force" would suffer many casualties taking on Majima Takahiro's servants, but that was fine. That had nothing to do with the knights of the detached force.

Thus, the knights marched on, closing in on the weaklings they were destined to crush.



Around that time, the main force that had been calmly marching forward was now quite close to the village. Nothing obstructed them. As before, the girl in a maid's outfit stood stock-still atop the walls.

"Keep advancing," ordered the knight in command.

At a glance, the girl looked human, but she was actually one of Majima Takahiro's servants. All the knights already knew this because the Holy Order had obtained information regarding Majima Takahiro beforehand.

The Holy Order's Fourth Company Commander Travis had worked with Louis Bard in Serrata. Louis's lord, Margrave Maclaurin, had taken custody of the Alliance Knights and seized charge of the soldiers who'd been stationed at Fort Tilia. Louis had heard about the turmoil at Fort Tilia, and he'd received information on Majima Takahiro that had been acquired during the evacuation through the Woodlands.

Travis had gotten every last bit of information from Louis, including details on the servant waiting for them atop the walls. Its name was Rose. During the evacuation, another servant named Lily had done all the fighting, so this one hadn't really taken part in any battles. But judging by how it hadn't provided any support with magic, they guessed it was a close-combat type of monster.

The knights weren't particularly wary of it. The monster they had to be careful of was Lily. That one could use powerful grade 3 magic from a distance, so combined with the walls and any earthen fortifications, it could become troublesome.

The defenders were probably aware of this, so it was highly likely that Lily would show up here. The one before them, Rose, was stronger than a common monster, but compared to Majima Takahiro's strongest servant, Gerbera, and the powerful magic user, Lily, it was one or two levels weaker. A common soldier might get overwhelmed, but the knights of the Holy Order had nothing to fear with their numbers. Numbers were power, and each individual was strong on their own.

If pushed to say it, they were more afraid that Rose was acting as Lily's shield. They had to kill it as soon as possible before that could happen. The knights were only wary of Lily, who'd yet to show up, so they continued to march down the path, vigilantly watching their surroundings for any sign of an ambush. That was why they were slow to react to the enemy before them.

A vortex of mana surged atop the walls, and the knights instinctively felt that the enemy was no weakling they could easily crush underfoot. Flaming bullets rained down from the walls right at them.

"Wh-What?!"

The knights froze. This was impossible. Chills ran down their spines, warning them this was something only a few people in the whole world could use—grade 3 magic on a grand scale. Or maybe not. Was this possibly even beyond that?

"C-Company! Shields up!" the commanding knight screamed.

Even if they were all vulgar by nature, they were still knights of the Holy Order and had received the best training this world had to offer. They reflexively gathered in a defensive formation. Some of them didn't make it in time, though.

"Aaaah?!"

"Gaargh?!"

It was basically a carpet-bombing. The area of effect was unbelievably large,

so the majority of the fifty or so knights were within range. Screams rose all over the place. Even though some of them had defended themselves in time, some were swept off their feet by the explosive blasts. The enemy had attacked unexpectedly from a blind spot, throwing the knights into disarray.

“N-No way!”

“Uugh... Shit. Isn’t this power grade 3...?”

“Don’t be stupid! Grade 3 magic of this strength can’t cover so much ground!”

“So grade 4?! This isn’t what we were told!”

Fundamentally, the destructive force of magic of a certain grade was inversely proportional to its area of effect. For example, when using grade 4 magic, a large area of effect would decrease the destructive force to the same level as standard grade 3 magic. Conversely, narrowing the range would increase it far beyond grade 3 magic.

The attack just now had the power of standard grade 3 magic while also covering a large range. This was the domain of saviors—grade 4 offensive magic.

“Impossible! This must be some kind of mistake!”

The knights groaned in pain and screamed in shock.

“I understand how unbelievable you must find this, but you’re right. The destructive power is only grade 3 at most,” Rose muttered quietly, looking down at them. “And it doesn’t have the flexibility of grade 4 magic.”

Normally, one could adjust the power and range of magic, but Rose couldn’t adjust the power because it wasn’t magic—it was an attack using magic tools. Magic tools were inflexible; their power was fixed and couldn’t be changed at all.

The area of effect was a different matter. Simply put, one just had to gather and use more runestones at once. That said, it was unusual to have a large number of expensive runestones, especially ones that could exhibit the power of grade 3 magic.

Magic tools that could manifest grade 3 magic, like the sword Takaya Jun had

wielded, were classified as legendary artifacts. It was impossible to wield more than one at a time. Normally, that is. Rose could make that pipe dream a reality by creating imitation runestones with her magic knife. She hadn't merely used these imitation runestones either. If she had, she wouldn't have been able to create the spectacle she did. Rose's imitation runestones could, at most, manifest grade 2 magic, but there was a certain trick to it.

"It does feel like a bit of a waste..." Rose whispered sadly as she tapped the butt of her axe against the ground.

Her mana suddenly swelled again, which made the panicking knights even more tense. The many imitation runestones Rose had installed along the walls the previous evening shone with light. The light grew stronger and stronger, showing no signs of stopping. Finally, no longer able to withstand the mana, they cracked. Rose ignored this and increased her output more and more, refusing to stop until they broke.

The idea was the same as the flash runestones Rose had once gifted Katou Mana and Kei. Those used a large amount of mana all at once, taking advantage of poor-quality stones and shattering them in the process.

So what if the same was done with high-quality runestones? This was the answer. Their power could match the legendary weapons of this world, producing an effect that rivaled grade 3 magic. This would normally just be a thought experiment; it was inconceivable to use high-quality runestones, more valuable than any gem and skillfully crafted over a long period of time, as a single-use tool.

Rose's imitation runestones were different, though. The raw materials needed—wood from any tree—could be found anywhere. She made them herself, so there was no additional cost. Still, not even Rose would use them willy-nilly.

Imitation runestones took time and effort to make too. The ones she was using now had taken her roughly three months to make, and she could only fire three volleys at most. Put another way, she was throwing away a whole month of work in an instant.

"But this is necessary," Rose declared, increasing her output even more.

Rose's master had once asked his best friend Kaneki Mikihiko to help Rose with developing magic tools. Mikihiko had used his knowledge of miscellaneous topics to teach her many things. They ranged from the foolish to the trivial, and even idle chatter. Among all that, he'd taught her about fireworks.

Once in a while, craftsmen would spend months making a firework that then burned out in an instant. However, that one instant colored the night sky with a blooming flower. Rose had felt the beauty and possibilities behind that.

Rose knew her limits. She was no match for Gerbera. She couldn't reach Lily's level either. She was beneath both of them. Monsters could increase their mana capacity by eating other monsters, but a puppet didn't have the organs to prey on others, so she would likely never close this gap. Her younger sisters were more likely to surpass her one day.

Nonetheless, by burning up an accumulation of effort in an instant, perhaps she could shine brighter than all of her sisters. With that wish in mind, Rose voiced her creation's name.

"Combat fireworks. There's no being stingy now."

The knights weren't just sitting around and taking it, of course. They retaliated with magic of their own, but the walls protected Rose. The village's defenses, which should've collapsed after taking a few shots of magic, didn't budge one inch.

That was because Rose had reinforced the walls personally. She'd only done so in her immediate vicinity, but even Fort Tilia's sturdy stone ramparts couldn't match them. The village was practically a fortress of its own now. The walls obstructed the majority of the knights' magic, while Rose fended off the rest herself. With nobody to stop them, the runestones finally shattered, and a rain of fireballs fell on the knights once more.

Chapter 9: Trampled Underfoot

“R-Retreat! Retreat! We need to regroup!”

The main force had suffered great damage from Rose’s attack and had no choice but to fall back, but the knights weren’t out of commission yet. Rose had used the greatest power available to her, but discounting the dead and severely injured, more than half their numbers could still fight. There were more than thirty of them. Disregarding their nature, they still lived up to their names as the very elite among all knights in this world. It would’ve been nice if they’d been annihilated, but things weren’t going to go that well.

Nevertheless, the knights weren’t going to recklessly charge in again. They couldn’t. They had no idea how many times Rose could use her combat fireworks—not that they even understood how they’d been attacked in the first place.

Rose’s attack was as successful as it could’ve been in taking the wind out of their sails. The knights obeyed their officer and retreated. The withdrawal was just temporary, though. Once they regrouped and strengthened their defenses, they were sure to come back. They could use reinforcement magic, so it was safe to assume they would boost their magic resistance. They would also surely heal the wounds they’d just suffered to a certain extent.

Even though she knew all this, Rose didn’t attack as they retreated. Her treasured combat fireworks had to be set in place, so she couldn’t pursue them. Even if she fired from here, the accuracy would falter with the increased distance. She only had one more volley, so it was better to save it.

She also had to consider her own condition. Magic tools consumed mana with each use, so Rose determined that getting them to retreat was good enough. Besides, in this case, having them recklessly charge in would be detrimental to her cause. She would have to use her last combat fireworks, which would inflict great casualties but probably wouldn’t annihilate them, then abandon this spot shortly after.

For that reason, temporarily repulsing them was more than enough. More precisely, that was the real goal behind using Rose's greatest but limited attack two times in the opening act of the battle.

"Everything is going to plan so far."

Even if they did come back, they would be more careful and slow their advance. That was sufficient. It wasn't her job to annihilate the enemy, anyway. Her job was already done, so there was no need to push herself.

"In any case, it's just as Lily said..." Rose uttered as she watched the backs of the retreating knights. She looked up at the sky, recalling the impish and charming smile of the sister she idolized. "This does feel a little like foul play."



White lightning fell from the sky. That was the only way to describe it, as the detached force of knights going through the forest encountered a problem.

"Gaargh?!"

The first to scream was the knight who'd made fun of his comrades in the main force moments ago. The other knights around him froze. After all, a giant white spider had crushed him flat.

"Wh-Why all the way out here?!" one of the knights muttered in fear at the sudden appearance of the enemy in their midst.

This force was meant to enter the village from a different angle while the main force drew the enemy's attention. *They* were supposed to be the ones launching a surprise attack. They hadn't expected to be the recipients of one. Why was this happening? Confusion and shock dominated their minds, and in the next instant, another emotion overtook everything.

The white spider swayed upright, revealing her face. Gerbera was beautiful. Even though the knights recognized her as a dreadful monster, they felt compelled to revere her. She was beauty incarnate, so much so that humans couldn't comprehend it. Her bewitching looks made them forget about her lower body. The Great White Spider shone brightest when in the midst of battle.

However, in spite of her beauty, she looked haggard, as if she were suffering from a great disease. Violet patterns marked her skin like tattoos from the base of her neck to her cheeks, sapping away her strength.

Her condition was heartrending...which gave her an air of degenerated and corrupted beauty. She had an allure that would make certain types of men want to pin her down, torment her, and sully her. Unfortunately for these men, they were pretty much all that type.

“It’s the Great White Spider of the Depths!” one of the knights screamed, a fervor born of cruel delight in his voice. “There’s nothing to fear! Commander Travis has already cast his Holy Gaze on her!”

That fact was like an absolute guarantee to the members of the Fourth Company. They’d defeated dozens of enormous monsters that Travis had weakened with his sacred curse. Not even the legendary Great White Spider would be an exception. The sudden attack had caught them off guard. They questioned why she was here, but none of that would matter once they killed her.

The knight sneered, brandishing his beloved sword with a flourish of skill, and...

“Huh?”

A spider leg plunged through his abdomen as he carelessly stepped in.

“Hak...”

He vomited blood and dropped his sword.

“Wh...at...?”

The last thing he saw was numerous spider threads spreading over the entire area.

“W-Waaaah?!”

The scattered threads wrapped around the knights. Without wasting any time, Gerbera tugged on them. Because of her tremendous strength and the surprise nature of the attack, her threads dragged many of them pitifully across the ground. The knights’ formation was utterly broken. Those who’d withstood

the force or had sacrificed their shields to block the threads gulped at the disastrous spectacle.

What the hell is this? they all thought to themselves. Hadn't the chains of the Holy Gaze shackled the Great White Spider? The shock from the sudden attack, the feeling of being captivated by her beauty... All those emotions were now dominated by an entirely new sensation—utter fear.

“Hrk?!”

Gerbera stomped a leg through one of the knights tumbling on the ground, then swayed her upper body.

“I'll admit it. As I am now, I'm definitely weaker.”

Her words were undoubtedly the truth. In her normal state, all those captured by her threads would've been crushed in a shower of blood. Her debilitation was the very reason she couldn't do that now.

“But what of it?” she asked the knights.

Her body was heavy. She couldn't breathe properly. Her movements were so slow they were yawn-inducing, and her luster was gone. That vexing Holy Gaze still wormed its way through Gerbera's body. But even after being cursed, she'd declared to her lord that she could still fight. She would never lie to him.

“You're far too conceited if you think that's enough to take my head, whelps.”

Her white hair dangled over her face, and her eyes, red like frozen blood, glared through the opening.

“Eep...”

The knights were forced to remember, whether they liked it or not. Before them was the Great White Spider written about in legends, the strongest monster in the Depths of the Woodlands.

“You bastards have laid your hands on something you should never have touched. Suffer in regret as you perish with that thought in mind.”

It was impossible to bind the Great White Spider with such measly shackles. Gerbera trampled those on the ground with her eight legs, then leaped into the air.

“Shyaaaah!”

Her legs smashed against shields, gouged through armor, repelled swords, and sent men flying. She was facing nearly a hundred knights of the Holy Order; even she would be overwhelmed by the sheer number of skilled combatants in a head-on battle. Nevertheless, despite the Holy Gaze’s curse, she easily held her ground against them.

There were two reasons for this. The first was Gerbera’s combat mastery. She’d lived for a long time in the Depths and had a great deal of experience. Even with her stamina, strength, and agility sapped, she could hold off the actual deterioration of her combat potential to a certain extent. What’s more, Gerbera specialized in independent battle, so she wasn’t very good at protecting others, but this time her job was to go on a rampage. It was here she could display her true value.

“F-Fuck! Surround her! Surround her!”

The second reason Gerbera could hold her ground was the terrain. Using the trees, Gerbera swooped down on the knights from every angle imaginable. Whenever they tried to use their numbers to their advantage, she would mess them up with her mobility. The debilitation magic they specialized in would be fine in an open field, but they couldn’t target someone they could barely see between the trees. Gerbera made sure of it.

This was the Woodlands, the Great White Spider’s home turf. She knew how to fight here better than anyone else in the world, and she threw herself into this battle. She wasn’t the only one to do so either.

“Gaaah?!”

With the knights’ attention completely fixed on Gerbera, grade 3 wind magic swept over a section of their formation. Blood splattered into the air as a girl with flaxen hair dropped down among them. She looked lovely, but also sinister.

“Partial mimicry—Devil Arm Mode.”

Her arm transformed—quite literally—into something out of a nightmare. Using the brute strength of a bear, the sharp mantis blades growing from each

of her fingers cut clean through several knights, bones and all. Those who escaped fatal wounds were afflicted with the poison coating her blades, and they turned pale and fell to their knees.

Even with their attention focused on Gerbera, ten or so knights dying in an instant was a bit of a shock. But that only stood to reason. With Gerbera in a weakened state, this girl was the strongest among all of Majima Takahiro's servants.

"N-No way!"

The knights knew of her. Her name was Lily. Among all the pawns available to Majima Takahiro, she was part of his core party. And here she was with Gerbera in the forest. In other words...

"It can't be... The monster tamer sent both of his strongest defenders out here?!"

The knights' eyes widened in shock.

"I-Impossible! What could Majima Takahiro possibly be thinking?!"

Their hysteria was understandable. The main force was supposed to be the one coming under attack by his strongest servants, yet, of all things, it was the detached force who found themselves suffering the deadliest blow. They'd made light of the situation, so they couldn't handle this new development. They'd never expected this encounter, and now they were forced to battle in very disadvantageous terrain.

That said, this was only what the situation looked like in hindsight. This spot was somewhat far away from the village. Majima Takahiro was insane to send his strongest fighters, who had to help strengthen the village defenses, wandering around all the way out here instead. They'd probably been on patrol, but the region around the village was pretty vast. Actually, bumping into the detached force had to be a coincidence, and if Travis hadn't put this force together to begin with, it would've been an utter waste of resources. With the village defenses weakened to such an extent, wouldn't the main force break through and end things on their own?

Yes. Even though they'd successfully found the detached force, it didn't

change the situation much. With the strongest fighters away, the village would be forced into a hard-fought defensive battle. That was what the knights here were thinking, at least. Naturally, separated from the main force like this, they had no way of knowing that Rose had gone all out and forced them into a temporary retreat.

“Why would he do this?!”

The knights had no way of knowing. Majima Takahiro had made a poor choice by sending his two strongest pawns out here, but by some unfortunate coincidence, they’d found the detached force and engaged them in battle in disadvantageous terrain. Furthermore, Rose had unexpectedly stopped the main force, which was supposed to be drawing Lily and Gerbera out.

If this was all a coincidence, then certainty didn’t exist in the world. That was why Lily felt this was foul play. Not that she would hold back because of that.

“K-Kill them! Kill them, dammit!”

The knights screamed in desperation. After several more casualties, they finally managed to take up a formation. They immediately split into a vanguard and rear guard, preparing themselves to intercept an attacker.

However, twenty of them were dead, and ten more were out of commission due to severe wounds or poison. That was about a third of the detached force down.

“Th-This wasn’t the plan!”

“I bet it wasn’t.”

Lily could understand their fear. This wasn’t their plan. How could it be?

Her beloved master was the first to realize the knights’ plan. He’d found it strange when Travis retreated the other day. The knight had backed off so easily. Back then, Travis had had fifty knights with him, but that hadn’t been enough to kill Majima’s group. Just as Gerbera had said, she and Lily could’ve taken them on.

If his other servants hiding in the forest—especially Lobivia—were to have joined the battle, Travis would’ve found himself in a pretty dire situation. Lily’s

master hadn't given that order because everyone else was hiding elsewhere, but Travis had had no way of knowing at the time.

Consequently, Travis's overly calm behavior was suspicious, and only one reason came to mind: they seriously believed in their superiority. That was the big miscalculation Takahiro had mentioned to Helena.

Looking at it now, it wasn't all that strange. Travis clearly had information on Majima Takahiro, but it was incomplete. For example, he had no way of knowing about Lobivia, who'd only joined their ranks recently. In fact, Travis had spoken like he hadn't expected Majima Takahiro to show up in the village at all. With that, they could conjecture that his information was outdated.

Travis couldn't predict that Takahiro was currently keeping Lobivia in reserve while having Lily and Gerbera boldly attack. Also, Travis didn't know that Lily had nearly reached the level of the legendary Great White Spider. What's more, they hadn't expected Gerbera to still be able to put up a fight.

"Gaaah?!"

Another scream. Another knight fell to the spear in Lily's normal hand. The experienced knights in the rear guard weren't going to let this opening pass, and they fired grade 2 wind magic in the form of bullets. However, the projectiles vanished into the maw of jagged teeth on the Devil Arm's palm.

"How unfortunate," Lily said with a smile. "What'll you do? At this rate, you'll be annihilated, you know?"

She *looked* like a lovely girl, but this must've been a nightmarish scene for them.

"A-Aaah! The girl to the front! Aim at her!" one of them screamed. "Seal her agility! Charge in as one!" Despite being driven by fear, the commanding knight gave precise orders.

At this rate, things would only get worse. Their forces were being shaved away little by little. Lily's Devil Arm was particularly fiendish.

She had brute strength that not even the knights reinforced by their allies' mana could match. Her claws were razor sharp, and failing to fend them off meant getting bisected. On the other hand, blocking them left deep gouges in

their shields, and if she hit their armor, the claws would reach their skin and send poison into their systems.

It was hard enough to surround someone in a forest battle, and they had Gerbera getting in the way too. Like Lily said, they'd be done for at this rate. So what were they to do? The reason they were so one-sidedly on the defense was because they had two opponents. If they only had one, they could put up a fight. That was the commanding officer's decision.

Unlike Gerbera, who was hopping from tree to tree, Lily had to stay grounded. It seemed she could devour magic attacks with the sinister mouth on her palm, but that wouldn't work on debilitation and reinforcement magic—in theory, at least.

“Wh-Why?! Debilitation isn't wor— Krgh?!”

A black spear bored through the screaming knight's throat. Debilitation magic struck Lily, but it didn't slow her down at all. For some reason, she undid her Devil Arm and started fighting with her spear, but her movements were keen and nimble.

Even if they couldn't match the brutality of Travis's Holy Gaze, which could pierce its target's magic resistance, an accumulation of debilitation magic could yield a comparable effect. As for why it wasn't working...

“I get it! Compatibility!”

One of the knights realized what was going on. Magic didn't always exhibit its effects. If there were a hundred different types of monsters, then no magic existed that would work on all of them. For example, holy magic was effective against undead monsters, but it did pretty much nothing to any other monsters. Debilitation magic that focused on weakening one's physical abilities also didn't have much of an effect on certain inorganic monsters.

“Use something else! Different magic!”

Depending on the circumstances, some monsters could repel pretty much all forms of debilitation magic. Fortunately for them, Lily was a slime, so this didn't apply to her. Therefore, the knights figured some other magic would work.

“They really adapt fast...”

Lily figured they would immediately realize the problem of compatibility. She didn't panic, though. The knights weren't wrong, but they weren't quite right either. They should've given it more thought.

What had poor compatibility with what? Physical debilitation magic wasn't compatible with Lily? That wasn't technically right. The knights of the Holy Order specialized in group tactics. Well-organized and coordinated group tactics—*this* was what wouldn't work against her. *This* they hadn't realized.

"Eat this!"

They unleashed fire-based debilitation magic as one. It was the same type as the water-based debilitation magic Leah had used in the battle against the ruby bear during the azure hares' suppression.

Fire injured most living beings. The magic only had enough force behind it to be a nuisance when compared to regular offensive magic, but it was different when more people used it. Countless flames twirled around the girl who was dancing in battle against the vanguard.

"Huh...?"

Just then, one of the knights at the front saw something strange—ears. Animal ears were pushing out of the girl's head through her flaxen hair. They were round, resembling a bear's ears. They were actually rather cute. The man figured he was going insane from the intensity of the battle, but the hallucination didn't go away.

"*Thank you,*" the girl mouthed to him.



“Eeek?!”

The girl’s lovely smile sent a chill down his spine, but he had no time to react. In the next instant, the earth burst into flames, with Lily at the center of the explosion.

“Aaargh?!”

When discussing the compatibility of debilitation magic, one had to consider something far more terrifying than its lack of effectiveness—the possibility of *strengthening* one’s target instead. For example, what would happen if one cast fire-based debilitation on a monster that manipulated fire? The flames were liable to grow stronger, and the enemy could turn them around on the attacker. That was exactly what was going on now.

“No, no, no. You can’t use fire magic against a ruby bear.”

Flames rose from all over Lily’s body. She was using the inherent ability of the ruby bear, the most troublesome monster native to western Aker, capable of burning all those around it. Having reproduced its ability with mimicry, Lily was powered up with all her enemies’ might put together.

Just as Lily said, the knights should never have resorted to fire magic. But that didn’t mean other magic would’ve worked either. Wind for wind, water for water, earth for earth; Lily could reproduce the powers of monsters to deal with all of them.

So long as there wasn’t a type that worked on any and all monsters, debilitation magic wouldn’t work on Lily at all thanks to her ability to mimic the nature of many different monsters. Lily’s very existence was a massive roadblock for the Fourth Company’s group tactics. About the only thing that would work on her was their trump card, Travis’s Holy Gaze, but he’d chosen to use that on someone else.

Bathed in fire as if they’d poured gasoline onto an open flame, the knights screamed and ran in every direction. There was no way they could fight like this. Every time Lily’s black spear plunged through the air, another burning knight fell to the ground. Gerbera also went proactively on the offensive.

By the time the fire calmed down, only forty of the hundred knights

remained, and pretty much all of them were suffering from burns. With them reduced to such a state, Lily's Devil Arm mowed them down, and Gerbera's legs pierced them. Their formation was broken, their numbers were down, and their morale was in tatters.

Regardless, Lily and Gerbera didn't hold back. They'd been entrusted with annihilating the detached force as quickly as possible, after all. Rose, who was protecting the village's entrance, knew that she couldn't annihilate the enemy on her own. Instead, she could hold them back for a short while until Lily and Gerbera finished with the detached force and came back.

For that plan to succeed, they had to finish their work using the limited amount of time Rose had bought them, so Lily and Gerbera fought with everything they had. It had been like walking a tightrope, but it was going well so far.

To an unknowing bystander, this must have looked like a boon of terrific luck. The truth, however, was different.

"This really is foul play," Lily said, smiling wryly as she thought of her beloved. "Right, Master?"

Chapter 10: The Words I Wanted to Hear *Shiran's* *POV*

“On reconnaissance...?” I asked.

Mana nodded from the chair at my bedside. “Yes. Senpai and Lily went out in the morning.”

“I understand Lily going, but even Takahiro is acting as a scout? Isn't that a little dangerous?”

“Not really. There's some risk to it, but Majima-senpai can perceive the entire area, and Lily has the sense of smell of a wolf. It would be pretty hard to find the two of them in a forest and launch an attack. Even if they are discovered, Lily's a fast runner, so they could easily get away.”

“When you put it like that...”

They were difficult to find, and they could run away before getting captured. That was more than they needed to act as scouts. Actually, they were quite the fiendish pair for the job.

“Fortunately, it doesn't look like the Holy Order is keeping that strict of a watch,” Mana added.

“They are under the impression they're on the offense. I can see why they're being a little negligent. Did they take this into account already before they went out scouting?”

“They did. Although, even if the knights were more vigilant, it's not like it'd be easy to get anywhere close to those two.” Mana's eyes then shifted to the spirit floating next to me. “It'd be different if they had a skilled specialist—for example, a spiritualist—with them, but I doubt Travis has any among his subordinates.”

“You have a point there.”

“The knights shouldn't know about Senpai's new mist magic either. Even if he

spreads some out, they won't be able to understand what it means. The Woodlands are gloomy anyway, so if he thins the mist out as much as possible, they shouldn't even notice it."

"Did you come up with this plan...?"

"I did. I'm surprised you can tell."

"Well, it's pretty obvious."

The plan was foolproof, and it made full use of Takahiro and Lily's abilities. When I looked closer at Mana, I saw inconcealable fatigue in her expression. She was seated, but she swayed about a little once in a while. She probably hadn't slept since this all started. She knew that she was of no use in battle, so it was fine if she was exhausted. Even after running about rescuing the villagers, she'd obviously spent the entire evening scheming.

"Senpai's Misty Lodge can grasp everything happening within it. Lily's five senses all surpass those of wild animals. They can find out the enemy's location and hear the orders being handed out from a spot where they won't be noticed."

"So we can hear all of their secrets."

That was pretty harsh. If our opponent wasn't Travis, I might have even felt sympathy for the enemy, but Travis had misread Takahiro's abilities from the start. From my point of view, the Fourth Company and Takahiro's group were about the same in strength. In a head-on confrontation, they would both suffer serious casualties.

However, the Fourth Company had split their forces in two so that Takahiro wouldn't be able to run away. Their plan wasn't bad in theory. If Takahiro was just going to lie in wait inside the village, the knights could fight from a superior position. Be that as it may, if Takahiro knew Travis's strategy beforehand, he could turn it against the knights and create a gap between them.

"That's the gist of it. Shiran, please take it easy and get some rest."

"Understood..."

I nodded back to her. She was here to check on how I was doing. Kei had been

by my side up until now but had excused herself for a bit. In all likelihood, she was helping Takahiro out.

“Don’t worry. I won’t force myself to join the battle,” I said.

“Really? I sure hope so,” Mana replied composedly.

I averted my eye. My gaze was suddenly drawn to the sword leaning against the wall. That was my sword. I’d asked Mana to bring it and put it somewhere I could see it. My sword was like a part of my body. I was restless without it. Now that I was dead as a knight, my sword was also pretty much dead, but even so, it was a part of me. Few people would choose to lop off and cast aside their arm just because they couldn’t move it. This was the same.

“Honestly...I thought you’d refuse,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, about bringing your sword?” Mana replied with a knowing smile. “Senpai might get mad if he finds out... Well, it’ll work out. From what I can see now, I don’t think you’re going to do anything reckless.”

Mana had apparently determined that I wouldn’t go on a rampage. She sounded confident. She turned to look at the sword leaning against the wall, then narrowed her eyes thoughtfully.

“I don’t know how things will go for a different Shiran, though,” she mumbled. “When that time comes, I figured your sword will be necessary.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Who knows? I don’t understand knights,” Mana said, shaking her head. “Still, I just have a hunch. That’s all.”

I didn’t understand. Maybe Mana didn’t really understand either. It felt like her words came from her intuition after watching all of us, rather than any logic.

“I will, of course, stop you if you try and rush off to fight,” she added.

“I know...”

I nodded obediently and closed my eye. Just as I’d told her, I wasn’t going to force myself into battle and break my promise with Takahiro. He’d told me that without the strength to participate, I was just a girl and didn’t need to fight

anymore. It was actually good fortune. In most cases, the only thing awaiting a knight was a miserable death.

There were those like Adolf, who after dying as a knight, lived on in a different way, but such exceptions were rare. My brother had died right before my eyes. I'd witnessed dozens of my comrades dying, so I'd figured I would meet the same end. And I had. When I stood against Juumonji Tatsuya after he revealed his true nature, I'd lost an arm and an eye. He'd also stabbed me in the stomach and pierced my heart.

I'd always, always fought with my life on the line. I'd clenched my teeth during my strict training, I'd endured pain on harsh battlefields, and I'd shed tears at the deaths of my comrades in arms. Yet I still swung my sword for the sake of protecting what I had to. And, in the end, I'd been cruelly killed.

However, thanks to Takahiro, I had unexpectedly continued my story. Now that I could maybe spend the rest of my days as a girl, I would surely be happy. But...

I opened my eye. The sword leaning against the wall naturally attracted my gaze once more. I recalled the conversation I'd had with Takahiro in the morning.

"Why do you go so far?"

"If I sacrifice myself, you can escape this danger. So, why?"

I'd asked a foolish question. It was because he trusted me as a companion. Takahiro wasn't the type to ever abandon his companions, which was why he wouldn't use me like some sacrificial pawn. I didn't even need to ask him something so obvious. I'd truly been a fool.

All the same, another thought came to mind. Had I asked him that because I wanted to hear another answer? If so, what did I want to hear? I continued staring at my sword as that incoherent thought grew larger and larger in my mind...

"Hm?!"

As I indulged myself in reverie, my sprite twitched in front of my eye.

“This is...?!”

The sprite’s senses were drawn to something with malice.

“An enemy?” Mana asked.

“Yes. And very nearby.”

I couldn’t spare it much mana right now, so the sprite’s search range was very restricted. Seeing as how it had detected someone, the enemy had to be in the village.

“But Aunt Leah’s spirit should be surveying the entire village. How could an enemy get so far in...?”

“Something unexpected must’ve happened,” Mana said, her face tensing. “I guess things won’t go as planned.”

She remained calm, maybe out of consideration for me. Only her hands, tightly clenched atop her knees, revealed her inner thoughts.

“It’s okay. This is a battle, so we have to expect the unexpected. Majima-senpai figured something like this would happen and put some countermeasures in place.” She was definitely worried, but she still believed in him. “This is the do-or-die moment... Please come back safely, Senpai.”

Chapter 11: Battle in the Village

Before anyone knew it, a foreign element had made its way into the village. Twenty knights of the Fourth Company, the elite of the elite commanded personally by Travis Mortimer of the Holy Gaze, had snuck in.

Travis had already taken into account the possibility that spirits were actively searching the area during their attack on this elven village, and though he'd already formed a detached force, he'd also considered that their surprise attack might fail. For that reason, he'd also prepared a means of slipping by the spirits' search net. As the descendants of visitors, these knights had the power to do so. They weren't the main force or the detached force; they were the true core of the assault. However, the knights were currently bewildered.

"Isn't this strange...?" one of the knights said several minutes after entering the village. "According to the plan, the detached force should be charging the village about now..."

There was nobody nearby. Not their fellow knights, nor even any villagers. The only thing present was a thin fog covering the area, giving the deserted village a creepy atmosphere.

"Somebody probably noticed their advance and is preventing them from entering," Travis said. His voice was calm, but the corner of his eye twitched. "I considered the possibility, which is why I put this plan together. The frontal attack was stopped, and the surprise attack too... The detached force is no doubt fighting desperately to gain entry about now. With his monster guards pretty much all busy, we go for the throat."

Travis boasted that things were all going to plan, but then another knight spoke up.

"I don't hear any fighting, though."

"So...what?" Travis responded, grinding his teeth. "Are you saying the detached force got caught up in a fight in the forest before they could even get

to the village?” Irritation stained his elegant features. “If that’s true, then Majima Takahiro realized the detached force was out there before the attack on the village began. Did we have an intelligence leak?”

“Maybe...”

The knight kept his response short, knowing full well how cruel his commander was. Striking a nerve now would be a bad idea.

“In that case, it’s possible the detached force was ambushed in the woods,” Travis said, clicking his tongue. “If they were caught off guard in the forest and held there, then they’ll be far behind schedule in reaching the village.”

Travis wasn’t incompetent. Judging by the current circumstances, he knew that his plan wasn’t going as expected. In reality, his detached force wasn’t just being held there. They were actually moments away from being annihilated. It would be too much to ask him to imagine that outcome, though.

“Seriously. How useless,” he drawled.

“What do we do?”

“The plan stays the same. We’ve come this far, so we don’t need them anymore. We’ll kill Majima Takahiro, and that’ll be the end of it.”

If the others were being held back, then it was safe to assume that pretty much all the enemy’s forces were on the field. Thus, Travis decided that the knights he had on hand were more than enough to kill one boy.

He’d miscalculated somewhat, but it wouldn’t affect the mission’s success. The ultimate goal was taking Majima Takahiro’s head. It didn’t matter how many sacrifices had to be made to achieve that. Perhaps this coolheadedness was Travis’s greatest weapon.

“This is the spot...”

The knights had narrowed down which buildings Majima Takahiro might’ve barricaded himself in based on their location and such. Travis’s group sneaked their way toward one of them. They were convinced it was the right place, because this house had clearly been modified.

What looked like ostentatious black metal plates reinforced the house’s walls.

Travis estimated that it would be difficult to blow them down with magic. It was impressive that they'd built such defenses in one night, but there was nobody left to defend it. Now the knights just had to check whether Majima Takahiro was actually there.

"Oh." One of the knights raised his voice. "I saw a boy in the window just now."

Travis took a look for himself and spotted an open window. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes. It was a boy with black hair."

"Hmm. There's no mistaking it's Majima Takahiro, then," Travis said, his elegant features twisting into a cruel smile. "Prepare to break in. Slaughter them to the last."



Embers crackled in the air. Zoltan stared at the burning building with cold eyes. What was he doing out here? That sour thought churned in his mind, and he started to feel nauseous.

"Let's move on," he said.

"Right on," Edgar answered.

The two of them quickly distanced themselves from the burning house. They had infiltrated the village with Travis but were temporarily working on separate orders. Travis had commanded them to search for ambushers in the village, and depending on the circumstances, stall them. While they were at it, they were also to set fire to all the houses.

Now that they were inside the village, their presence was known, so there was no longer any need to hide. If the village they were trying to protect went up in flames, the defenders would be shaken, and it would also boost the morale of the main and detached forces who were attacking from different angles. Zoltan admitted it was an effective strategy, but he found it unexpected that Edgar was accompanying him on this mission.

"Why didn't you go with Commander Travis?" Zoltan asked.

“Hm? No reason. Just instinct.”

“Instinct?”

Zoltan and Edgar had known each other for a pretty long time, but Edgar’s answer was still curious.

“I figured it’d be more fun to come with you. That’s all.”

In short, he smelled the stench of battle this way. Edgar’s smile was dreadful, as if a bloodthirsty wolf had taken human form. In his own words, this wasn’t the premonition of a pathetic slaughterhouse. This was Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch getting worked up for a real fight to the death.

It was difficult even for Travis to control Edgar when he was like this. The other members of the company never even tried to get close to him. Having spent so much time with Edgar, Zoltan was the only one who stood side by side with him without any particularly strong feelings about it.

“Besides, who else will work with you?” Edgar added.

“You have a point there.”

Even if they were going to link back up with the force shortly, Travis wasn’t the careless type who’d let his most talented subordinates act independently. Unfortunately, many in the company avoided Zoltan of the All-Seeing Eye because of the gift he’d inherited from his ancestor. The shady types in particular avoided him like the plague. But Edgar was different. He only cared about fighting, and he had no intention of hiding it.

“It’s quiet. According to the plan, the detached force should be forcing their way in about now,” Zoltan whispered while on the move.

Much like Travis, these two found it strange that the detached force had yet to arrive. Actually, since they were walking around the entire village, they likely had a more accurate grasp of the situation than he did.

“That ain’t all. You notice?” Edgar said. “There’s no sign of any tussle at the gate where the main force was supposed to attack. Something probably happened to them too.”

They couldn’t see anything with the walls and houses in the way, but if any

fighting was going on, they'd be able to hear it from this distance. Conversely, if the other forces hadn't met with any fighting, they would be inside the village already. It was baffling that neither of these cases applied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." Zoltan murmured.

"Well, to me, it sounds fun to have 'em put up a fight."

"That's why I don't like it," Zoltan replied seriously.

"How rare," Edgar said with a suspicious look. "You hate this that much?"

The Zoltan Edgar knew was tired of absolutely everything. There was no joy in life; he simply fulfilled his duty. Even when people thanked him for defeating monsters, even when he steeped his hands in wicked deeds under Travis's command, nothing really moved him. Yet Edgar could catch a glimpse of emotion in Zoltan regarding this fight. This caught Edgar's attention.

"Something up?" he asked.

"I..." Zoltan started, then abruptly held his tongue. He grimaced as if noticing something. "What...? Why?"

Zoltan's bewildered eyes were fixed on a specific building.



Even though things hadn't gone exactly as planned, the mission was still going well. That was how Travis saw things. That was why he only started doubting when some of his subordinates broke into the building.

Travis figured that Majima Takahiro would gather all the villagers in one place and solidify his defenses. If so, his forces should've met a counterattack the moment they charged in. There was none of that, however. They entered the building with no resistance. What was going on? Travis sank into thought—then suddenly turned around.

"Oh shit. They noticed me."

A little girl with red hair stood there, cursing. She'd apparently been hiding in another building and had come to check what was going on. Travis had spotted her before she reached the building. The other knights who'd yet to enter also noticed her.

“You’re...”

At first, Travis figured she was a villager, but he immediately realized she wasn’t. Her ears were small, so she wasn’t an elf. In that case, she was... Wait. Why had she come here in the first place?

“Whatever. This is close enough,” the girl muttered to herself. She wasn’t afraid of the armed knights. “If you’re Takahiro’s enemies, that makes you my enemies. You better be ready.”

The girl—Lobivia—spoke in a dangerous tone and grasped the sash holding her clothes together.



She removed the sash, loosening her clothing, then pulled her arm out of her sleeve and stared at her enemy. She already had a cranky look in her eyes, but now she faced her enemies with a fiendish gaze, and her pupils shifted into the abnormal eyes of a lizard.

“Fourth Company! To arms!”

The knights still outside the building lifted their shields at his command. The little girl’s body swelled in size, sending her loosened clothes soaring into the sky. Scales covered her skin, a carapace grew over her body, and membranous wings spread out from her back.

“Graaawr!”

Her roar shook the earth, displaying the fangs lining her mouth.

“A-A dragon?!”

The dragon glared at the armored men from above.

“I-It was disguising itself as a human?!”

The knights weren’t shaken only because the girl had transformed. The very presence of a dragon was a major problem all on its own. Dragons were considered the ultimate class of monster in this world.

There were several reasons for this. One was their resistance to magic. A few monsters in this world were known for having a high resistance to pretty much all magic. The most famous among them were dragons. It wouldn’t prove as fatal as fighting against Lily, but dragons were definitely a difficult opponent for the Holy Order. Having Lobivia positioned as the last line of defense had significant meaning.

“Grrr...”

This was the battlefield the boy she idolized had entrusted her with. She wasn’t honest with herself and was rather curt when she spoke, but in her heart, flames of joy and a fighting spirit burned bright. That heat transformed into actual fire surging up her throat.

“Graaawr!”

Her roar drowned out the knights' screams, and fire shot out of Lobivia's mouth. The knights immediately held their shields up to block it.

"Hgggh! Hold your ground!"

They were quick to react, but Lobivia had expected that.

"Graaah!"

Now that they were fixed in place on the defensive, Lobivia charged. The knights readied themselves. The rear guard reinforced the strength of the vanguard, who gripped their swords to—

"Wha?!"

In the next instant, a dense fog covered the entire area. It was pretty much a smoke screen. Losing sight of the incoming attack, the knights were dumbfounded. Lobivia, however, didn't hesitate. They'd discussed this situation beforehand, after all. She'd also lost the exact location of her enemies, but that wasn't much of a problem. Her sheer mass and speed were enough of a threat on their own.

"Hrgh?!"

She lowered her body and rammed through them. Three knights took the full force of the charge, and flew out of the mist and up into the air. Lobivia was protected by her sturdy carapace, which she'd inherited from her mother, the carapace wurm Malvina, known to the world as the lord of the Dark Woods of northern Aker, the Rage of the Earth. This carapace had crashed into the defenseless knights, so they were beyond help. Armor folded, bones broke, and meat turned to pulp.

"Gah! What a pain!"

Among the chaos, Travis remained unharmed. He'd inherited a superpower from his ancestor, but he also had the combat experience to match his title as commander of the Fourth Company. He'd leaped out of the trajectory of the charging dragon and was the first to make it out of the mist safely.

"But not yet! We're only getting started!"

A clever mind, excellent combat abilities, and a trump card in his Holy Gaze...

Travis was certainly in the top class among the elite of the Holy Order. He assessed the situation calmly. A dragon's strength was astounding, and the mysterious fog had taken him by surprise, but he still had an overwhelming advantage.

Only three knights had been defeated. There were fifteen others left, including himself and the ones who'd gone inside. All of them were exceptionally skilled, even among the entire Holy Order. If Travis called back the men who'd gone inside the house, his victory would be certain... So he thought, but in the next instant, his eyes shot open.

"Grraah!"

Lobivia kept up her momentum and rammed the building behind Travis's group. Only half the house was shrouded in mist, so he had a good view of the spectacle before him.

"Whaaaat?!"

An unbefitting shriek passed his lips, ruining his elegant features. The house, which had been reinforced with black metal plates, turning it into a fortress, easily collapsed from Lobivia's single strike.

It was as if it had been arranged beforehand. Travis's men who'd gone into the building were sealed inside and crushed. Not even the elite could escape severe wounds from a falling building. It was possible that several of them would die from it too, depending on their luck. That was to say nothing of them getting out safely and helping in the fight.

"This is impossible!"

Travis screamed, no longer able to maintain appearances. Majima Takahiro was supposed to be inside that building. One of Travis's subordinates had confirmed it. If his predictions were right, the villagers were all in there too.

So why did the dragon destroy the house? Was it an accident? Had it carried too much momentum in its charge and hadn't been able to stop? No, that was all wrong. As proof of that, Lobivia got back up from her ramming attack and took in a deep breath. She was preparing to unleash more fire.

"Wai—!"

Even Travis turned pale at that, but it was too late.

“Graaawr!”

The flames mercilessly poured out, burning the collapsed house. A brutal blaze rose into the air for an instant. The fire spread fast. Unnaturally fast.

“N-No way... Th-This can’t be...”

“Graaaaaah!”

Lobivia turned around with a spirited roar to face Travis and his subordinates, who all stood there in shock at the loss of the knights who’d entered the building.



“What’s up, Zoltan?”

“I sense fear...”

Edgar narrowed an eye at Zoltan. “The hell do you mean?”

“I sense the fear of weaklings. From there.”

Zoltan pointed at a house. His eyes were strangely unfocused. They were looking at something that wasn’t there—thanks to his blessing and his curse, the power of the All-Seeing Eye.

Understanding what was going on, Edgar nodded. “I get it. So the village elves are hiding there, huh?”

“In all likelihood... What do we do?”

“You need to ask? We can’t just leave ’em be, yeah?” Their orders included silencing any witnesses. “It’s a crappy job, but work’s work. We gotta do it.” Edgar didn’t try to hide how tiresome he found this as he drew his sword. “Tch. Guess my instinct was wrong. This way was a miss.”

Zoltan silently drew his blade, but he didn’t start walking.

“This is a bit of a problem...” he uttered.

The house’s door opened, and a boy revealed himself before the two knights.

“No way, you’re...” Edgar said, his eyes wide in shock.

It was Majima Takahiro, the main target of this entire operation.

Chapter 12: Last Line of Defense

I kept a close eye on the two men before me without letting my guard down. Edgar Guivarch and Zoltan Michalek—I remembered who they were. During my reconnaissance, I'd had to be especially careful of these two.

"To think we'd be the ones to bump into Majima Takahiro. What a riot," Edgar said, astonished, but he put on a warlike smile as soon as he came to grips with the situation. "So that asshole Travis missed the mark, huh? Serves him right. I can just imagine his pissed-off face."

"No. About now, he should be leading an attack against me," I replied.

"Huh?"

Edgar didn't understand, but I had no reason to explain things to him. Why was I here when Travis had witnessed me inside the house he was assaulting? That was because of the Misty Lodge's magic.

I normally used this magic as a smoke screen and as a way to perceive what was going on over a wide area, but it had another effect too—glamor. Using that power, I had made it look like I was in that house. The illusion wasn't all that strong, so I was lucky that someone with a weaker resistance to the magic caught it. They probably still would've broken into the conspicuous building, but this at least had given them more confidence.

That on its own would be meaningless, of course, but the house was booby-trapped. We'd made it look like a fortress, and though it was somewhat sturdy, it was more or less a paper hut. Any impact that could break its main support pillar would bring the whole building down. That was how Rose had set it up.

In addition, we'd used another trick, one we'd learned during our time in the Woodlands. Back then, the firewood Rose had prepared for us had burned very well. With her magic knife, she could render normally difficult-to-burn lumber into that state. Remembering that effect, we'd stacked some of Rose's modified wood inside the house.

With that set, our plan was to have Lobivia wait for the knights to go inside, ram the house, and set it ablaze. I could sense the trap being activated with my perception magic. Unfortunately, we failed to defeat Travis, but we managed to eliminate a significant portion of his forces.

I could see that Travis was frantic now. I could faintly hear a dragon roaring in the distance with my own ears. Concluding that I didn't need to worry about Lobivia for now, I shifted my focus away from the scene. More precisely, I didn't have the leisure to pay attention to her. I had to concentrate on my own battle.

The two knights glared at me. We'd utilized everyone's strengths to their fullest, and pretty much all of our enemies had been held back. Among the two hundred knights of the Fourth Company, only these two had reached the building where we were sheltering Shiran and the villagers. Zero would've been a much nicer number, but I couldn't complain about this result.

I lifted the thin mist I'd cast over a wide area. Reading my intention, Asarina wound herself around my left arm. I clenched my shield-wielding hand tight and drew my sword.

I had no qualms about pointing it at the enemies before me. They'd struck down unarmed villagers. I had a righteous cause behind me—to protect my companions. Also...for some reason, the way Travis and his knights acted disturbed me to my core. I felt like they couldn't be allowed to remain in this world.

“Oh come on. What're you playing at?”

Seeing me ready myself for battle, Edgar chuckled scornfully. He stood at the ready, just as one would expect of an experienced knight, but he wasn't really giving me the time of day. My ability wasn't suited for direct combat. Edgar knew this.

“You're a monster tamer, yeah? You really gonna fight on your own?”

“Yeah. I can't let you through here, so I have to.”

“Hey... Don't fuck with me,” Edgar said, his smile vanishing. “Come on. Where's that white spider? How 'bout that slime that looks like a girl?” His voice trembled in anger and disappointment. “Don't tell me... I get it. That's

why the main and detached forces got held up. Those two are out taking care of 'em, huh? You little shit. I had my hopes up here.”

It seemed Edgar had been looking forward to fighting Gerbera or Lily. It must've been a downer that I'd shown up instead.

“I'm gonna cry. Seriously.”

“Then how about you leave?” I suggested.

“I'd like to, trust me, but that's not gonna fly. I've got a job to do.”

Edgar let out a deep sigh and casually swung his sword around. His apathetic yet bloodthirsty eyes reflected my figure.

“I'll just off you quickly. After that, I'll link up with the others. The fun will start after—”

He went from casually standing there to accelerating toward me in an instant. In contrast to his crude behavior, his movements were fluid and refined. He stepped in sharply, stabbing his sword out, and the sound of steel clashing rang in the air.

“Huh...?”

“No matter how you look at it, aren't you looking down on me a little too much?” I said with composure.

Edgar was surprised that I'd repelled his attack, but there hadn't been any motivation behind his charge to begin with. It had been plenty fast and sharp, but my regular training partner was Gerbera. She was stronger and faster. I could handle this much with ease.

“Haah!”

I pulled my sword back and aimed for his throat. Edgar's reactions were precise. He quickly stepped back and dodged in perfect rhythm. At least, it would've been perfect had I been on my own.

“Ssster!”

Asarina lunged at Edgar's face, baring her fangs to gouge his eye out.

“I won't let you!”

“Sster?!”

However, Zoltan slashed from the side, cutting off Asarina’s Venus-flytrap-like head. He provided excellent support and even twirled his blade back around to strike at my neck. He was just as skilled as Edgar, somewhere around Shiran’s level. In that case...

“Oooh!”

I brought my left arm between us. An instant later, his sword crashed against my shield.

“Hggh! What the?!” Zoltan groaned bitterly.

His sword bounced back as if he’d slammed it into a metal wall. This would’ve been impossible without an overwhelming difference in strength. Zoltan furrowed his brow deeply, probably numb in the hand.

I had no reason to ignore the opening this created, but just as I boldly chose to go on the attack, I felt a chill at the back of my neck. I obeyed my instincts and stooped low. A sharp slash passed right over my head. I dodged it, but it wasn’t over yet.

“Ugh!”

A kick came right for my face. I thrust my shield out to block it. Had I failed to do so, my head would’ve been smashed to pulp. I caught the kick successfully but flew backward a few meters. I couldn’t show any openings, so I corrected my posture midair and landed on my feet.

I raised my eyes and met Edgar’s stare. The playful atmosphere about him was utterly gone. He shook the leg he’d kicked me with, then threw Zoltan a short glance.

“You caught Zoltan’s attack head-on, plus that block just now...” he muttered, then returned his eyes to me. “You’ve got some crazy fucking trick set up in that left arm, don’t you?”

He saw through me, but it was fine. Just as Edgar implied, my left arm housed the power of the Great White Spider’s tyranny. It was so strong that the backlash of swinging it with all my might rendered my own arm unusable.

It was a pretty useless technique like that, so I'd tried many things to make it more practical. Recently, I'd succeeded in momentarily manifesting this power while limiting the burden on my body. It was still difficult to gauge the timing, but it was at a level where I could use it in real battles. I'd wanted to keep this in reserve to clinch a victory given the chance, but it seemed I wouldn't be allowed that luxury.

"Even without that strength in your left arm, I guess your combat level is around the same as the average guy in our company," Edgar said, an almost strangely calm look in his eyes. "Your swordsmanship is still a little shoddy, but you're not half bad at defending and evading. I didn't think you'd block my kick. You've got such a goddamn serious face, but you sure know how to get down and dirty in a fight, huh?"

Edgar's sword dangled loosely at his side, carving marks into the ground.

"They told me Majima Takahiro couldn't fight... You're actually pretty good," he added.

"You got a problem with that?" I retorted.

"Nope. Not at all. Never in a hundred years," Edgar answered with a smile so wide it looked like it could split his cheeks. "I'll get to have some fun now."

I could almost smell the thick stench of blood on his smile. I would've preferred he got bored and stepped aside, but I'd ignited a fire in his heart. Edgar stooped low, a fierce expression still on his face, and Zoltan stood at the ready next to him.

"It's a bit of a letdown that it's two-on-one, but don't go bitching about it being unfair. Do your best to hang in there."

"I'm not going to bitch. This is a fight to the death, after all," I said, then shook my head. "Besides, I'm not alone."

"Huh?"

"Asarina, Salvia."

"Masss—ter! Ter!"

"You called, my dear?"

The two of them replied to my call immediately. Asarina stretched out, drifting about in the air and menacing the enemy with her fangs. Salvia appeared behind me, still half-mist, and wrapped her arms around me without weighing me down at all.

“We’re going all out. Please lend me your strength.”

“Ssster!”

“Of course.”

Together with my reliable companions, I glared at my foes.

Chapter 13: A Hard-Pressed Battle

Three swords crossed, and steel clanged over and over as each participant swung like they were chipping away at life itself. The equilibrium didn't last long, though; the scales quickly tipped to one side. I wasn't surprised, though, because I'd sensed it the first moment our blades met. My opponents were more skilled with a sword than I was.

"Raaah!"

"Hmph!"

Edgar swung his sword like a windstorm, while Zoltan filled in any gaps Edgar left. I wouldn't quite say it was unexpected, but these two were an impressive combo. Edgar's attacks were blindingly fast yet heavy. His sword was wider and longer than the ones the other knights wielded, and it had the weight to match its size. Despite this, he could swing it with abandon. That, coupled with his skill, definitely made him a menace.

Zoltan was also an irksome enemy. In contrast to Edgar's weapon, his sword was slender and light, and he wielded it with nimble wit. He kept blocking my strikes as if he could see the future, and he grazed my body with the tip of his blade as if he were weaving his way through gaps in my consciousness.

Zoltan was supporting Edgar, but it wasn't as if Edgar was just swinging wildly. He was actually matching his partner's movements. They left no opening for me to get in any attacks of my own.

From what I could tell so far, if I were facing any of the other knights, I could've retaliated one or two times by now, or maybe even overturned the situation. But against these two, I doubted I'd find any opening in their offense.

It was tough luck for me that they were the ones who'd made it all the way here. Or maybe they'd made it this far precisely because they were who they were. In that case, this was the natural outcome.

"Grgh!"

Death bearing the weight of steel grazed my neck with terrifying vigor. Sweat ran down my cheeks, and I shivered. I was acutely aware that a single mistake would lead directly to my last breath. If I froze in fear, they would cut me down. If I hesitated, they would slice me up. But preventing my demise already took everything I had.

My breathing was ragged, and sweat poured from my brow. Blood from my injuries speckled my white clothing with crimson. The reality was that I didn't have the strength to repulse these enemies.

I was different from the saviors throughout history and the cheaters of the exploration team. I didn't have the tremendous power they'd so frivolously received that could remove any obstacles before them. In other words, it was painfully obvious that I was no hero. But that didn't mean that I amounted to nothing either.

"The hell is going on?"

"How...?"

I heard Edgar and Zoltan groaning. They surely found this strange. Retaliation wasn't allowed. They were the ones attacking in this one-sided battle. The scale had remained tipped in their favor, and they had dominated the fight with their overwhelming advantage, so why was their enemy *still* alive?

"Raaah!"

Edgar roared and swung from my right, no indication of his movements beforehand. My shield wouldn't make it in time to block the attack, so I jumped as far back as I could to evade the air-rending blade. Zoltan waited for the exact moment I landed, delivering a calculated diagonal slash from behind. Normally it would've cut me by the time I noticed it, but I twisted my body and turned to face Zoltan.

Zoltan's eyes shot open. "Again?!"

This wasn't the first time I'd dodged his surprise attack. The trick was using the information flowing to me from the Misty Lodge's magic. Up until now, the mist had been imprecise because it had been covering the entire region around the village in a thin fog. However, I'd just deployed a faint, milky-white mist that

covered only a ten-meter area. The precision increased the narrower the range, so like this, I could clearly see any blind spots I had.

What's more, now that Salvia had manifested, information traveled through the mental path between us faster than ever before. We were quite literally one in body and mind at this point, and the boundary between us was actually very vague.

This technique, which could only be used if we fully accepted each other, was an embodiment of everything we'd acquired in this world. Thus, it bore wondrous fruits. Being able to observe an entire battlefield was, in a certain sense, the final step to becoming a master of war. Our technique was similar to that, an imitation made possible by our coordination with each other. It was one of the reasons I was still alive. As for the other...

"Ssster!"

Edgar looked like he was going to close in, so Asarina stretched out a great distance and attacked him. She could only stall him for a few seconds, but her contribution was still crucial. Now that Edgar had to slow down a little, which created the tiniest gap in their coordinated attacks, I could deal with Zoltan. I used all my might to run down that narrow path to survival.

"Oooh!"

I avoided Zoltan's thrust by holding my shield at an angle where his weapon would slide off the surface. The impact was light, yet it had a sharpness to it that could've easily ended my life. He remembered the pain in his wrist from the attack I'd blocked earlier and was adjusting his approach properly.

Zoltan unleashed a number of quick slashes, then stepped in while stooping low. He stood back up with an upward slash. I continued stepping back and bent my body far to the side. I dodged his blade but lost my balance. I stomped on the ground, trying to right myself, when suddenly, I threw myself to the side instead.

"Raaaah!"

In the next instant, Edgar, having cut Asarina down, lunged in and aimed right where my neck had been.

“Tch. Does he got eyes on the back of his fucking head?!” Edgar snapped.

He’d been certain of that blow. In truth, he’d been close enough to graze my hair with his blade. But this still wasn’t over.

“Like hell you’ll get away!” he roared.

“There!” Zoltan shouted.

Edgar forcefully swung his blade down, aiming for where I was tumbling to, and a flickering thrust closed in alongside him. Being in midroll, I had no way of evading.

“Ssster!”

Asarina struck the ground like a whip, forcing my body back up. The swords chasing me hit nothing but air, and, unable to react myself, I fell shoulder-first onto the ground.

“Ugh!”

Any normal person would’ve broken a bone and fainted from the agony, but my body was reinforced with mana. It only felt like a hard blow. I gritted my teeth to endure the pain, then sprang up to my feet.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Salvia asked.

“Ssster?”

“I’m fine,” I replied. Asarina’s help had been rather violent, but if not for that, I’d have been dead. “Get ready for the next attack.”

“Heh heh... Ha ha ha! So you got by that one too, huh?” Edgar said, bursting into laughter. “You’re not half bad.”

He smiled like a wild beast. The more dangerous the battle, the happier he was. Unfortunately, this wasn’t going to develop to the point where I was more trouble than I was worth, such that they’d retreat. This fight would only end with a fatal loss.

“To think you’d manage on your own against the two of us like this,” Edgar continued, savoring the taste of this moment. “You’re impressive.”

“Not really. I’m not that big a deal,” I responded.

I wasn't being humble. I merely specialized in surviving against opponents who were far stronger than me. On the day the Colony fell, I'd witnessed hell. Caught in the violence of superhumans who'd gained power that could influence the very world, I'd been on the verge of death. In a sense, that was the start of my life here.

Because of that, I had a standard to meet. In short, I had to gain enough strength that I could survive such a disaster. So long as that remained my objective, even if I hadn't reached that stage yet, I expected myself to at least put up this much of a fight. Besides, Edgar was misunderstanding something—I wasn't on my own.

I was exhausting all of my strength to hang on because I believed Lily and Gerbera would come running given enough time. Asarina and Salvia were actively helping me, while Rose and Gerbera's equipment supported me. If I were truly on my own, facing either Edgar or Zoltan would take everything I had.

"You two are the impressive ones," I said, half stalling for time. The other half of me was serious. "Why do you attack the village's elves when you have so much strength?"

There was more passion in my voice than I'd expected. My stomach had been churning ever since I saw the Holy Order destroying the village. A blazing indignation that surprised even me welled up inside. That fire in me had urged me to question them.

"Hm?" Edgar grunted, looking annoyed. "What? You think knights should protect the weak or something?"

"I—"

"Cut it out. That's such a killjoy," Edgar said dismissively as he dangled his sword about. "I just wanna enjoy fighting. That's all I need. Working as a knight, I get more chances like this to fight. I even get food and board. I don't give a shit about anything else, and I don't need anything else either."

He was speaking from the heart, and in a sense, his words were innocent. In all likelihood, Edgar wasn't intentionally evil. He didn't get pleasure from oppressing and hurting people, and he didn't enact brutality for the sake of

personal achievement. For example, say he came across a formidable enemy obliterating a friendly force. He would surely charge in without fear, but his reason for doing so wouldn't be honorable. This problem wasn't unique to Edgar either.

"'Knight' is just the word for a pawn sent out as the vanguard for the saviors," Edgar said.

"Beings who can easily kill monsters in a direct confrontation all on their own. That is what you saviors are," Zoltan added. "Nevertheless, once outnumbered, even they can die. In order to preserve their power for as long as possible, 'expendables' are needed to die in their stead. That is the true duty of those we call knights."

A dark fire burned behind the gloomy man's eyes. It seemed I'd hit a nerve.

"In that sense, you saviors are nothing more than pawns too," he continued. "Irreplaceable pawns, and replaceable ones. We're all pawns in the end. There is absolutely nothing noble about it."

"Well aren't you unexpectedly chatty today, Zoltan," Edgar said, looking surprised.

Zoltan, on the other hand, looked slightly agitated. "Not really," he muttered. "Naive ideals about knights simply grate on my nerves."

"Ha ha! Grates on your nerves, does it? That's also unusual for you!"

Zoltan sank into silence.

"Well, that's the gist of it," Edgar said, turning back my way and shrugging. "If you wanted to give us some big ol' lecture, then give it up. You're dreaming if you think we're gonna repent or something. Haah, so damn naive." With those last words, the atmosphere changed. "You're way too naive. At this rate, you're not gonna hold out until the spider or slime gets here."

A chill ran down my spine. Something was coming. Convinced of this, I put myself on guard.

Seeing me do so, Edgar snorted. "You're stronger than I expected. I had fun. Think of this as thanks for that."

He then put his hand to his head. His fingers bent as he strained them, and mana gushed from his entire body, enough to make me tremble.

“Hnnngh!”

“Wha?!”

It was too bizarre. Edgar’s hair turned scarlet, and his skin turned metallic black. His muscles swelled. Steam rose from his body as if it contained a great heat. He had a relatively small stature for a man, but now he was larger than any normal person.

“Haah...”

He removed his hand from his brow, revealing a single shining horn. His eyes widened, and burning pupils stared right at me.

Ogre.

That was the first word that came to mind.

“To be honest, I was saving this power to fight the Great White Spider.”

The ogre placed his sword on his shoulder and laughed. From the very beginning, Edgar had said that he wanted to fight Gerbera—to fight against the Great White Spider from legends—but he couldn’t fight her head-on when he didn’t even have the strength to bring me down after such a long time. However, Edgar had a trump card that could oppose Gerbera. It was the power passed down to the beloved of blessed blood, a savior’s power from the past manifested through their bloodline.

“Battle Ogre Sir Edgar Guivarch. That’s the name of the man who killed you. Remember it.” In the next instant, he was right in front of me. “Die.”

I’d been as vigilant as I could, but by the time I noticed, the ogre was swinging his sword straight at me. His speed rivaled that of Gerbera’s pounce. Salvia just barely managed to capture the movement, and I perceived it myself at the very last second. My body didn’t react in time, though. The ogre’s hardy blade came sweeping in right at me.

Chapter 14: Knight and Savior

A full-force attack from an ogre-like body closed in on me. I couldn't react—I could only see myself getting bisected at the waist and dying—when suddenly, my left arm sprang up.

“Wh-Whoa?!”

My shield moved and blocked my sight. I didn't understand what was going on, but I reflexively put all my strength into my left arm. In the next instant, the ogre's sword struck.

“Gah?!”

It was a heavy blow, and I couldn't withstand the impact. My feet came right off the ground. The only thing my brain recognized was that I was flying through the air. I crashed into something, breaking right through it.

Before I knew it, I found myself in a wooden hallway. I could hear screaming from another room. I'd been blown through the door of the house that I'd been protecting and had tumbled into one of its hallways. This was pretty bad.

My entire body was numb from the impact. If they came after me now, I wouldn't be able to do anything...but the pursuit I feared didn't come.

“Let's go, Ayame!”

“Graoooooh!”

A series of explosions rumbled outside the building. The mist I'd barely managed to maintain located Kei and Ayame atop the roof, raining fireballs and grade 2 magic down on the two knights.



“What a pain in the ass!” Edgar roared.

It was an ambush, but he managed to fend off the attacks. He used his large sword to cut down a fireball headed straight for him, then jumped back from the magic Kei had aimed at his feet. Still, their efforts were more than sufficient to buy the time I needed.

“Well done...” I remarked, gathering mana inside me. “Misty Lodge...”

I used the mana that kept Salvia manifested as well and spread our magic mist densely around the entire house. With this, Edgar and Zoltan’s visibility was gone. Now, we just needed to...

“It’s up to you, Ayame...”

“Graooh! Graooh! Graooooh!”

Explosions burst intermittently inside the sealed white world. Reading the intent of this fog, Ayame continued raining down fireballs. She’d been left watching the manamobile a lot lately, but she wasn’t just our little mascot. She was tiny, but she was still a monster from the Depths. No one could make light of her power.

The flames from her belly were as destructive as grade 3 magic. What’s more, unlike magic, she needed only a single breath to prepare her next shot. I was actually surprised at the amount of mana she used to keep up this incessant barrage, yet she showed no signs of weakening whatsoever.

“Fuck!” Edgar cursed. He was being forced to remain on the defensive, and not even the Battle Ogre could retaliate against an enemy attacking from long range with this dense fog blocking his sight. Ayame couldn’t see her target either, but in her case, she was trying to keep enemies away from the house, so she could just fire indiscriminately.

With the restricted range, we could maintain the Misty Lodge for a relatively long while, which bought me a good amount of time.

“Ssster?”

Asarina stretched out from my left hand, moving in front of my eyes as I lay there on the ground. She cocked her head in concern.

“Thanks, Asarina. You saved me.”

The block with my shield earlier had all been Asarina’s work. Since she was wrapped around my left arm, she’d immediately brought it up to defend for me. Sadly, as a result of being forced to catch Edgar’s blow, my left arm was broken now. Blood dribbled down my fingertips. My arm was out of commission until I could get it healed with magic. Still...

“I managed...” I murmured quietly.

There was an unconscious fervor to my voice. A fire burning deep in my chest was seeping out of my mouth.

They’d called me naive.

They’d declared this for thinking that I could hold out until Gerbera or Lily arrived, yet I was still alive. I couldn’t move my left arm, but I could still fight. Asarina’s sacrificial defense, Ayame and Kei’s ambush—they were all cards we’d been hiding. We only survived the enemy’s trump card because of the preparations we’d made for the worst. It was wrong to call me naive.

They’d called me naive.

They’d labeled me as such for thinking a lecture could get them to repent, but I never thought they would. I’d had no intention of criticizing them when I asked why they’d attacked the villagers. I didn’t believe people like them would repent so easily. Nonetheless, deep in my heart, I’d felt like I had to ask, like I had to confirm something.

They’d called me naive.

They’d disparaged me so for having such delusions about knights...and maybe that one was true. I didn’t know them, and they were knights themselves, so I couldn’t deny it. Maybe knights *were* pawns used as vanguards, expendables to die in the stead of irreplaceable saviors. At the very least, some people in the Holy Church, which had great authority in this world, believed it. If so, who was I to refute it?

Maybe knights and saviors were simple pawns, one replaceable and the other not. I couldn’t deny that either. As for his comment that there was nothing noble about it... Well, that was different. He was wrong. He was absolutely

wrong.

I'd experienced it in Fort Tilia, after all. Shiran, the commander, and all the Alliance Knights who'd fought at my side had risked their lives to protect others. They'd been earnest, single minded, and pure. I'd felt the nobility in their actions.

That was my truth. No matter what anyone said, my reality consisted of what I saw, touched, and sensed for myself. Even if knights were nothing but pawns, my outlook didn't change.

"That's why...I have to..."

I dragged myself into a seated position, and just then, a hoarse voice reached my ear.

"Takahiro...?"

It was a girl's voice, so weak it might vanish at any moment yet still so strong. I raised my head and spotted an elf coming around the corner of the hallway toward me.

"Shiran...?"

I called her name in a daze. She was supposed to be weaker than ever and bedridden in her room. She knelt on the floor, so it must've been hard for her to even stand up. Judging by her haggard expression, anyone could see that she was in no condition to be walking around.

Still, I didn't question why she was here. I was surprised, but not confused. That was because Shiran had a firm grip on her sword.

"I see..."

That was more than enough for me to understand the situation. I let out a sigh of understanding.

"She's a knight. Hopelessly so, in fact. No matter what happens, that will never change."

Helena's voice resounded deep in my mind.

"She is a knight. Please don't forget that."

Then I remembered the words the commander had said to me. I knew why she'd entrusted Shiran to me. I knew what I had to do. With that newfound conviction, I clenched my bloodied fist.

Chapter 15: The Knight's Salvation *Shiran's POV*

Because of my vast combat experience, I noticed a change in the atmosphere.

"This is...?"

I sat up, my body still weak. The omen of a terrifying power about to be unleashed sent chills running down my back. Something was happening right outside the house, and the moment I pictured who was fighting there, my body unconsciously began moving.

"Takahiro...!" I blurted as I tumbled out of my bed.

"Shiran?!" Mana shrieked in surprise from the chair at my bedside. I had no time to pay her any mind, though.

"Hggh! Gah!"

I crawled across the floor, unable to put any strength into my withered limbs. My arms trembled. My mind couldn't keep up with what I was trying to do, but my body kept trying to get me to my destination.

Mana stood up from her seat in a panic and grabbed my shoulders. "Wh-What are you doing?"

I weakly squirmed about, resisting her hold. "...to go," I mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I have to go."

Without even realizing it, my voice crawled out of my throat. I abandoned any thought and obeyed my heart. I stretched out my trembling arm, reaching for the wall—to the sword leaning there.

What was I even trying to do? The calm portion of my mind remained dubious. I couldn't fight anymore. I didn't need to fight anymore. I'd turned into a demilich and learned how unsuitable I was to be a knight. I'd been driven to the very edge, ruining my mental stability and wrecking my undead body's balance, and a part of me was still worn out by this bloodstained vicious circle.

“Hey, Shiran, even if you aren’t a knight, I want you to stay with us.”

That was what Takahiro had said to me. Even if I wasn’t a knight, even if I was nothing more than a normal girl, he’d told me he wanted me with him. He’d embraced this cold body of mine.

“It’s fine if you can’t fight. You’re not a knight anymore. You’re just another girl.”

I was happy. My heart trembled. Those words had saved me...so why was my hand once more trying to take up the sword? My mind questioned the act, but my body didn’t hesitate.

“Shiran...” Mana muttered.

I raised my head and saw my reflection in her eyes. I could see my own desperate expression. However, there was no sign of a ghoul rampaging with anger, nor was there any sign of a warrior prepared to sacrifice herself. There was someone else there—someone who couldn’t yield. Mana was wise and easily understood.

“Very well...”

Her bewildered expression turned to one of conviction. She quickly walked to the wall, picked up the sword leaning against it, and came back to me. She helped me to my feet, then handed it to me.



“Please take care of him, Shiran.”

“Thank you...!”

With that, I stumbled forward and opened the door.



I closed the door behind me and walked into the hallway.

“Ack... Hgh...”

My legs tangled up immediately, and I bumped into the wall. My limbs weren’t moving the way I wanted them to. I felt like I was going to collapse to my knees at any moment. Regardless, this was far better than my previous bedridden state. My undead body was greatly influenced by my mental state, meaning...

“I’m stabilizing...?”

At the eleventh hour? No, because it was the eleventh hour. Some things only came into sight during bad situations. Maybe Mana had noticed the atmosphere. I had a premonition verging on conviction as well. Even if my thoughts couldn’t keep up, my body and heart knew.

Ever since I became like this, I’d only known anxiety, pain, and hesitation, but the answer was right in front of me now. That conviction pushed me forward. I clenched my teeth and proceeded down the hallway. The room I’d been sleeping in was on the second floor, so I managed to stagger my way to the staircase.

“Ah...?!”

Even though I’d recovered somewhat, I could still barely walk. How could I descend a staircase properly? I missed my footing instantly and quietly shrieked as I tumbled down to the first floor.

“Gah... Ugh...”

I was dizzy. A violent despondency assaulted my body. I felt like vomiting, as if I’d had too much to drink, but just then, an ominous presence swelled up just outside the house. The sound of something breaking to pieces followed soon

after. The villagers hiding in the house screamed, and I heard something tumbling into the hallway.

It was Takahiro. It had to be. I knew by instinct. Perhaps that was thanks to the mental path, even if my connection to it was shoddy. Shortly after, I heard explosions from the outside, and a white mist flooded my vision. Takahiro was probably buying time to prepare himself for the next attack.

In other words, he'd withstood the enemy's first attack. I honestly admired him. The ominous presence I'd detected felt similar to that of Gerbera when she was serious. If Takahiro had managed to withstand an attack like that, then it was praiseworthy. He'd certainly gotten stronger.

Takahiro's talent for fighting was middling at best. He didn't have any grand blessing like many of the other visitors either. Yet he'd struggled his way through several life-or-death situations, and he was constantly imposing a strict training regimen on himself, so he'd grown considerably.

I'd watched him as his swordsmanship and spiritualism instructor. His path was so severe that any normal person would've broken. But Takahiro hadn't.

He was his servants' master.

That conceit supported him. His unshakable conviction for his servants' feelings became his strength. The same could be said about his servants too. They responded to the expectations they placed on themselves, and as a result, both servants and master kept getting stronger. Their relationship felt like an ideal to me, and I was envious.

"I have...to go..."

I started moving again. Fortunately, I hadn't injured myself by falling down the stairs, and I didn't feel any pain. I straightened up, thanking my undead body for the very first time. My limbs seemed to have forgotten how to work. They jerked about, and just standing on my knees made me dizzy. Yet, despite my spectacular tumble down the stairs, my hand firmly gripped my sword as though it would never let go again.

Aah, so that's what it means. I could hear the last piece of the puzzle clicking into place, and my thoughts finally caught up to my heart. Having come to an

understanding, I laughed at myself.

“Good grief... How hopeless am I...?”

The Third Company of the Alliance Knights was gone. I was no longer a knight. What’s more, I’d come to realize that I was unsuitable to be one. But...but I still wanted to be a knight. I really was hopeless. Backed by my desire, I gripped my sword tighter.

Aah, that’s right. I wanted to be a knight to protect everyone. That’s my truth. I now knew what I’d wanted to hear from Takahiro.

In short, I knew what he was to me.

I knew what I wanted him to be.

Sadly, that wish would never come true. I could see that clearly.

“Ah...”

I crawled around the corner of the hallway and spotted the person I was searching for. The white mist made for poor visibility, but I wouldn’t mistake him for anyone else at this distance.

“Takahiro?”

The boy turned my way. He looked like he’d been in an intense battle. His white clothes were stained red all over. His left arm was particularly bad, dribbling blood from his fingertips. Nevertheless, the strength hadn’t left his eyes.

“Shiran...?”

Takahiro looked surprised that I was here, but his expression changed right away when he understood.

“I see,” he muttered, glancing at the sword in my hand. He stood up, then walked my way. “Did you come to fight?”

“Sorry...”

I cast my eye down. I’d promised to stay in my room, and here I was wasting Takahiro’s consideration. No matter what feelings I harbored in my heart, that was the truth. Takahiro didn’t get angry, though. He just smiled.

“I’m not going to criticize you,” he said. “Actually, maybe I was mistaken.”

“Takahiro...?”

I raised my head. He looked back down at me with earnest and warm eyes.

“Ah...”

I couldn’t turn away from his gaze. It was sucking me in, as if his eyes held the very core of my being captive.

“Hey, Shiran.”

“Yes...?”

I forgot about my urge to vomit and replied like a child. My heart had long since stopped beating, but I was under the delusion that it was pounding in my chest. I had a premonition. Or maybe it was hope. I could feel my emotions pouring out even more than before. I couldn’t see anything else. Here in this white world covered in mist, there were only the two of us.

“Just maybe, I might’ve been trying to do something very cruel,” he said. “I might’ve said something wrong.” Even his usual overly serious tone was like a spell mesmerizing my heart. “But if that is what you wish for...”

He held out his blood-soaked hand. It was like a scene out of a play.

“Will you fight by my side?” he asked. “I want you to protect everyone with me—as a knight.”

“T-Takahiro...”

Shivers ran down my body like a wave. A surging torrent of emotion filled me to the brim. I couldn’t endure it, and tears spilled from my eye. These were the words I wanted to hear from him. This was what I’d given up on.

“I-I... B-But, I’m not a kn-knight any...” I tried to reply, but my trembling lips were getting in the way.

“You’re right. The Third Company is gone. In that sense, you aren’t a knight anymore,” Takahiro said. Unlike me, he was very calm. “But that doesn’t matter.”

He was always like this. At a glance, he looked like a boy with nothing special

about him except a tender heart appropriate for his age. But when it came down to it, his resolve was unshakable.

“The commander once told me something,” he continued. “Knights devote their swords to the ideals of justice and the salvation of the weak. Specifically, here in this world, they come as a set with the heroes of salvation. So, the only thing a knight needs is a savior. Everything else is inconsequential.”

“But you’re—!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Takahiro said, nodding. “I’m no savior.”

Yes. I’d given up for this very reason. Majima Takahiro was special to me. I was supposed to die back at Fort Tilia, but he’d picked up my shattered dreams from the depths of darkness.

Takahiro wasn’t a dazzling hero out of a story, but to me, he was the savior I was meant to fight with shoulder to shoulder. However, Takahiro always insisted that he was no savior. On the contrary, he hated the very existence of saviors. For that reason, I’d never conveyed these feelings to him. In truth, his opinion still hadn’t changed.

“I won’t become the type of savior this world hopes for,” he said with a bittersweet smile. “I know my limits. I’m a petty man who only cares about the people close to me being happy.”

There was a certain kind of resignation behind his words, but at the same time, there was also some kind of pride behind them, saying that was a good thing.

“That’s exactly why I want to answer the feelings of those who are dear to me,” he added, flashing a bright smile. His expression was that of someone who’d bet everything he had on what he believed in with no regrets whatsoever. “Shiran, you’re dear to me.”

His expression and his casual tone left me speechless.

“If you need this from me, then I’ll meet your expectations,” he continued. “What is a knight? What is a savior? It doesn’t matter what the world thinks. If this is what you wish of me so that you can become a knight...”

He spoke his next words with more sincerity than ever before.

“Then I will become your savior.”

What emotions lay behind those words? He was so serious, so he wouldn't have said that half-heartedly. His words seeped into my soul.

“Is it all right for me to be a knight...?” I asked.

“To me, you are the definition of a knight,” Takahiro answered immediately. “That feeling hasn't changed since the first moment I saw you at Fort Tilia. Honestly...I really admired you,” he said, somewhat embarrassed. “I also wish for you to be a knight, Shiran, so I'm happy that you wish something of me.”

I was the one who was happy for being needed. I was sure I was tens, maybe hundreds of times happier. I could feel my wavering core rapidly regaining shape. Perhaps it was a rebirth, in a sense. I'd been broken, and now I was remade even stronger. I felt pure and innocent joy, and there was only one response that came to mind.

“Takahiro.”

An oath. I would establish an oath that would never be broken. I corrected my posture as much and as smoothly as my weakened limbs would allow.

“I offer my sword, my body, and my soul, in all their entirety, unto you.”

I knelt before him, and reverently bowed my head.

“I am your sword. If an enemy would threaten that which you wish to protect, then no matter who it may be, I shall remove them from your path.”

Thinking back on it, this was strange. The natural order was for a savior to exist and for a knight to offer them their sword, but that wasn't the case for us. Only by seeking each other out did we become a savior and a knight.

But as I was now, whatever was normal to others didn't make a difference. I was a knight, and Takahiro was a savior. If that was what we wished of each other, then nothing else mattered at all. I had no more hesitation or misgivings.

“I swear here and now, I shall remain by your side until the end of time.”

I took the hand of my dear savior, a savior who existed only for me, and

sealed my oath with a kiss.

Chapter 16: A Savior Only for One

Shiran's tender lips touched the back of my hand, but I wasn't embarrassed at all. I could sense how sacred her actions were. It was a kiss to seal an oath between a knight and savior, and a relationship between Shiran and me, one unlike any other, was born in this moment.

I could feel our joy through that one point of contact, but that wasn't the only thing I could feel. Our connection through the mental path, which had been so weak before, was deeper than ever. Things didn't stop there either.

Shiran calmly sipped at the back of my hand. I definitely felt something from this. Her cheerful lips continued making wet noises as she passed her mouth along the back of my hand, tracing my veins—chasing my blood. Undead monsters replenished their mana by ingesting blood, and mine in particular was a feast for Shiran.

Now that I thought about it, although Shiran had sucked my blood before, the first time she'd been out of her mind and the other I'd forced her to drink. This was the first time she did so of her own volition.

Perhaps because of that, her movements were awkward, but I glimpsed the earnestness behind them. Over and over, she pecked at my hand like a little bird. I felt a shiver run down my lower back each time she did.

Shiran raised her face, seemingly unaware of my reaction. She swallowed what was in her mouth, and I could hear the gulp coming from her throat. That sound was etched into my brain now. I couldn't calm down. Her lips formed a smile as she sighed in satisfaction.

"Haah... That was...delicious," she said with a slight lisp as she licked her reddened lips.

There was an indescribable allure to how she was acting. The desire for food, sleep, and sex were all tied to pleasure. It was a mystery whether this generally applied to undead monsters, but in Shiran's case, the fulfillment of her desire

was intoxicating. That said, she still wasn't satisfied, and, embarrassed, her expression went slack.

"Forgive me, Takahiro...may I have a little more?"

She'd forgotten herself in the moment, so her pleading was earnest, yet she couldn't ignore how shy she felt. This was bad. Really bad. It was a lot worse than I'd expected. Frankly, Shiran was very attractive, and such a diligent girl coaxing me like this had a destructive power all on its own. When compounded with her adorable behavior, it was...well, a bit of a problem.

"Takahiro?"

"Oh, um, sorry," I said, only noticing that I hadn't responded until she called my name. "Asarina."

"Ssster."

Asarina lightly pierced my palm with her fangs, which would do for now, but blood ran down my finger faster than I thought it would.

"Ah!" Shiran cried, watching the red droplets fall to the floor.

Maybe she thought it was a waste. Springing into action with knightly reflexes...wasn't really necessary in this situation. She'd probably decided that pressing her lips against the wound would just allow more blood to spill. Instead, she put my bloody finger clean in her mouth.

"Guh, hnngh..." The surprise attack, her licking my finger, made me moan nervously.

"Ah..." Shiran went stiff, my finger still in her mouth. She'd heard me, or maybe she'd felt my finger jerking and knocking her tongue back. "Umm..."

She only realized what she'd done after that. For an instant, her lips pulled back, but after noticing another red droplet, she froze. Disregarding this recent bout of boldness, from an efficiency standpoint, she wasn't wrong. She hesitated, but in the end, she resigned herself and lowered her eyelid.

"Mm... Mwah..."

She suppressed her shame and began sucking up every last drop of the crimson nectar. She made sure nothing spilled, diligently holding my finger fast

in her mouth.

“Haah... Pwah...”

I could tell that she was gradually getting more and more engrossed in the act. Her tongue crawled along the length of my finger. She sucked on it sweetly and swallowed the blood in her mouth with her saliva. I was getting dizzy, and not just from losing blood and mana.

She even started play-biting, perhaps unconsciously, barely sinking her well-lined teeth into my skin. My finger twitched, the numbness spreading all the way to my sense of reason. The sight of her delicate lips devouring my rough-looking finger was poison to my eyes.

I averted my gaze from the stimulating scene, but maybe that was a mistake. Now that I wasn't watching, I could feel the sensations assaulting my finger even more intensely. My reasoning was falling apart. People often called me overly serious, but I was still a healthy young man.

That wasn't all there was to it, though. If I hadn't thought of Shiran in any special way, I'd have been able to maintain my cool a little better, but she was too close to my heart. Plus, she was even more attractive than usual right now, so this was a little too stimulating for me.

“Pwah...”

A short yet long while passed, and Shiran finally released my finger.

“Phew...”

The mana resupply seemed to be working. Her face no longer had the haggard look of a patient on their deathbed. It was like there was a sudden glossiness to her skin or something. With my blood and mana sucked away, I was no longer in any condition to fight, but if Shiran was back in action, then it was a pretty good trade.

I pulled my hand back and clenched my fist the moment I saw my wet fingertip. I was relieved it was over, but at the same time, I kind of regretted that it had ended. I was being an idiot. I couldn't misunderstand. I was Shiran's savior, she was my knight, and this was necessary to seal the oath between us. There was no other intent behind it.

I shook my head and expelled the excitement from my brain. We'd finished resupplying her mana, and I had to change gears now. So I thought, anyway.

"Huh...?"

I'd been careless to think it was over, so I couldn't react as Shiran staggered toward me.

"Takahiro..." she said, her voice entranced. It sounded just like it had that day in Fort Tilia.

"Hmmgh?!"

In the next instant, something soft pressed against my lips. Our noses rubbed against each other. Only after several seconds did I realize that Shiran had sealed my mouth and that her face was all I could see. The light of reason deep within her single blue eye had faded. I reflexively tried to get away, but two arms firmly wrapped around my head and blocked me. I couldn't escape. On the contrary...

"Hrrm?!"

Her small, cold tongue wrenched my mouth open and slipped in. The sensitive contact heightened its presence in my warm mouth. Her tongue entwined around mine and traced along my teeth. She sucked on my lips.

I had no idea what was going on. Why was Shiran suddenly doing this? She was being far too passionate. I tried to get my stupefied thoughts together, when...

"Mgh..."

I noticed Shiran's throat move, and it reminded me that undead monsters needed a periodic supply of mana. To Shiran, my body, connected to her through the mental path, was the greatest of feasts. Blood was basically just a body fluid, but body fluids weren't limited to just blood. I'd been misunderstanding things. That was all. Although, maybe one method was more efficient than the other. Still, if I were pushed to say it, this was less like an undead monster wanting mana, and more like...

Satisfied for the time being, Shiran slowly pulled back from my rigid body. Our

tongues separated, but a silver strand of saliva linked our lips together obscenely. The thread broke, and in its stead, the threads of reason reformed.

“Ah!” Shiran’s eye shot open, and she quickly covered her mouth with both hands. “Ta-Ta-Ta-Takahiro, th-th-that was, um...”

I’d never seen her panic so much. She normally maintained a calm demeanor, but at times like this, she resembled Kei.

“Uhh... Um, it’s fine,” I said, holding my hand out for her to stop. Honestly, I was pretty shaken, but seeing a tear in her eye, I couldn’t act flustered. “I get it. That was nothing.”

Unlike when she drank my blood at Fort Tilia, Shiran was aware of her surroundings right now. Awareness had nothing to do with losing all sense of reason, though. Rather, even though I was the one on the receiving end, it had taken me everything to retain my sanity. Reason could fly out the window more easily than a sheet of paper in the wind. Therefore, this was my mistake. At least, that was what I thought, but Shiran’s reaction was different than I expected.

“N-Nothing...?” she repeated strangely, apparently stuck on that word.

“Y-Yeah. That was a ‘meal,’ right? I didn’t think anything of it.”

“You...didn’t?”

I thought I’d understood Shiran’s behavior, but her reaction suggested otherwise. She looked a little sullen, but then she blinked, having noticed her own reaction. She patted her cheeks, finding it somewhat strange herself. Her fingers slowly traced her lips as if she was reminiscing over the feeling of our kiss.

“Oh.” She sighed in understanding and smiled at me cheerfully. Then, as if she’d discovered something invaluable, she said, “I suppose I’ve been in love with you, Takahiro.”

“Huh...?”

“I truly am dense. To think I’d fail to realize something so simple.” Shiran stared at me, seemingly finding the way I froze in shock endearing. “In the end,

no matter where I go, I'm still a knight. This is the truth. That said, it doesn't erase the fact that I'm a girl. If you're a savior to me as a knight, Takahiro, then to me as a girl..."

Shiran closed her eye and put her hand to her chest, confirming her emotions.

"Hee hee. How simple," she said. "Even as a girl, you're my dear savior. Aah, I finally get it now."

"Shiran..."

Her confession was so sudden that I couldn't respond. Shiran opened her eye, saw that I was dumbfounded, and then giggled.

"It's a little mean to act so shocked. I can at least fall in love."

"No, but, I mean..."

"I'm kidding. I have no room to talk after failing to notice my own feelings."

Shiran started acting bashful. She was embarrassed, but her single eye remained fixed on me. The expression she made as both a knight and a girl was one she'd only ever show to one person in the entire world.

"I love you, Takahiro," she said earnestly.

She was more attractive than ever before. At the same time, her expression was the strongest I'd ever seen from her.

"Let's go, Takahiro. I shall clear away all of your enemies."

Chapter 17: The Knight Joins the Fray

“Fiiiiinally.”

A cold, penetrating voice shook the thinning mist. I came through the house’s broken door, where an ogre awaited me.

“You done stalling with this goddamn fog?” Edgar asked, his sword resting on his shoulder.

“I’m out of mana, unfortunately,” I answered honestly.

He’d have found out right away even if I’d tried to hide it. I couldn’t use the Misty Lodge anymore. My mana and stamina were exhausted, and even walking was tiresome.

Edgar noticed my limp as I came out. His sword drooped as if he’d lost interest. “Strolling out here in that state means you’re ready to meet your maker, then?” he said, sighing, disappointment clear in his voice.

The Holy Order’s goal was to kill me, but this guy only cared about fighting. Though I’d put up a bit of a fight, I was now in a pitiful state, so seeing me definitely blew the wind right out of his sails.

Kei and Ayame, who’d been holding them back until now, leaned over the edge of the roof and called out to me.

“Takahiro! It’s dangerous!”

“Kuu!”

“Stand back, Kei, Ayame. It’s all right now,” I said, taking a step outside.

“What a letdown,” Edgar said with a snort. “Zoltan, you can take all the glory.” He said it with disinterest, but no response came. Edgar turned to him with a dubious look. “What’s up, Zoltan?”

“It can’t be. This is...” Zoltan muttered, his voice trembling. He still hadn’t noticed Edgar’s call. For some reason, he was extremely shocked. His eyes, staring my way, looked unfocused. I cocked my head, while Edgar clicked his

tongue in irritation.

“Tch. If you’re not feeling it, then fine, I’ll—”

Just as Edgar casually took a step forward, a quiet voice resounded through the area.

“There’s no need to hurry, is there?”

That was all it took to make known who exactly she was.

“I shall serve as your opponent.”

“You’re...”

The ogre, who was about to turn his irritation into violence, came to a stop. An elf with an eyepatch came out of the building behind me. She wasn’t wearing armor, and she wasn’t carrying a shield. She was dressed no different from a village girl, but she had a sword in hand, and the atmosphere surrounding her eloquently demonstrated who she was.



“Lady Shiran!” Edgar exclaimed, his bewildered expression changing to one of fiendish glee. “Is that so?! *You’ll* fight me?! Now *this* is what I’m talking about!”

His voice was full of heartfelt joy. Shiran took a step in front of me, and Edgar spread out his arms, welcoming her.

“I heard you got all weak,” he said, “but lookee here, you’ve got some real fight in you. Were you maybe buying time to get her ready? If so, it was a great plan. Let me praise you. Looks like things are gonna get fun!”

Even with the threat of mortal combat right before him, Edgar screamed with unbearable delight. His surging fighting spirit shook the air like an electric current.

“Hey, you’re all pissed that your countrymen got killed, yeah? Then throw all that anger at me! Entertain me with your frantic struggle as the strongest knight of the northern Woodlands!”

The blazing heat from his eyes was focused entirely on Shiran. He was an ogre who lived only for battle. His stare was enough to render any normal person unconscious, so the average soldier wouldn’t be able to maintain their willpower. Even if one had the guts to stand before him, it would be difficult to avoid getting swallowed up by those eyes. A savior’s descendant, the Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch certainly lived up to his name.

Perhaps this was all a part of the Battle Ogre’s superpower. However, Shiran regarded the ogre’s howl like a gentle breeze and quietly readied her sword.

“I do not wield my sword to exact vengeance,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I devote my essence to the savior. A knight’s sword exists only to protect what it must. I doubt I will ever wield my blade in anger again.”

Unlike Edgar, there was nothing overbearing about her stance, yet the air enveloping her possessed a strength unaffected by the ogre’s bloodlust.

“That’s why I only wield my sword now for the sake of protecting what I must,” Shiran said, raising the tip of her blade. “In accordance with my oath, I shall exhaust everything this body has to offer. You shall not pass.”

Her fighting spirit was breathtaking. She was like a sword, her steely resolve a sharp blade at her enemy's throat.

"Bring it on," Edgar said, smiling. "Hey, Zoltan. How long you gonna zone out?"

This time, Zoltan responded. "Sorry... I'm fine now."

Was it simply impossible to remain in a daze in this strained atmosphere? Zoltan's grip on his sword was firm again. I would've preferred he stay there stupefied the whole time, but things weren't going to be that easy. In fact, Zoltan's next words were the complete opposite of what I'd hoped for.

"Edgar. I'm going all out."

"What?"

"It's necessary," Zoltan said, lowering his eyelids before muttering, "I need to see this through."

What did he mean? He opened his eyes once more, and though I didn't see any obvious change, something felt off.

"What was that...?" I murmured.

For a single instant, I felt the mental path quiver. It probably wasn't intentional on his part, but rather some kind of reciprocal interference. Abilities of similar nature rejected each other much like magnets of the same polarity.

My power could form a connection with a monster's heart. Zoltan likely had an ability that also affected the heart—not that I knew what it was—and he was using it to its maximum potential. How much of the original would he be able to bring to the fore? Considering Travis and Edgar as examples, his power was presumably something far out there.

"Takahiro," Shiran said, a heartwarming and unconditional trust in her voice, along with pure affection. "Please watch closely."

She took a step forward. In response, Zoltan lowered his stance.

"Sir Zoltan Michalek of the All-Seeing Eye," he announced. "Prepare yourself!"

Shiran casually strode forward as Zoltan charged. Edgar, his sword still resting

on his shoulder, took a wait-and-see approach. This wasn't a duel; he was ready to take advantage of any openings.

Zoltan wasn't just a sacrificial pawn, of course. He'd also received the best combat training the world had to offer as a knight. In battle, his slender sword weaved in and out like a phantom, and even though the weight behind his strikes was much lighter than Edgar's, he showed no openings while he prodded at his enemy's weaknesses, as if he could read their mind.

He also understood that this was no one-on-one duel. Immediately after lunging at Shiran, he shot a quick glance my way. He was wordlessly informing Shiran that if she acted carelessly, that which she was trying to protect would be in danger. That simple act narrowed Shiran's options considerably.

Now that he demonstrated the full extent of a savior's superpower, Zoltan's combat abilities far surpassed what he'd shown me. Yet he wasn't being negligent either. He was definitely one of the strongest knights among the—

"I already told you. You shall not pass."

"Hrk?!"

As they crossed, Shiran's sword easily cut him down.

She'd defeated him with a single blow. Even if he could read minds, it became irrelevant against an opponent of such skill. Blood sprayed in the air as Zoltan collapsed.

"Wh...at...?"

There was no opening to take advantage of at all. Edgar's eyes shot open as Shiran pointed the tip of her blade at him.

"Lady Shiran of Aker," she announced in turn. "Prepare yourself."

Chapter 18: Nestled Together

“Oooh!”

Edgar let out a hair-raising roar and closed in on Shiran. Manifesting the superpower of an ogre, his body was basically a mass of muscles now. He had a human shape, but the density of his muscles and the strength they produced was entirely inhuman.

“Hmph!”

He swung his sword. The slash came with an abnormal force that defied common sense even in this world, as if he were wielding a tree trunk. Even at this distance, I could feel its destructive potential on my skin, causing me to gulp. In terms of brute strength, Edgar was approaching the level of his ancestor who’d used this same superpower.

Nevertheless, he was facing the former strongest knight of the northern Woodlands. He rivaled the power of a savior from the past, but Shiran had once faced a full-fledged savior of the present.

“Haaah!”

A chain of attacks came at her, leaving no room for her to breathe, yet Shiran intercepted every last one. She moved like lightning. She wasn’t merely fast either. Her movements were smooth and efficient. It was clear she was outmatched in terms of physical strength, so she was making up for it with technique.

That was easy to say, but it was hard to put into action. Edgar’s swings weren’t only left to brute force, nor was there much waste to them either. He was, without a doubt, a master swordsman.

Surpassing even this master and refusing to yield a single step, Shiran displayed the true worth of her title as the strongest knight of the northern Woodlands. Her skill had been refined through maddening training and from surviving near-death experiences an unimaginable number of times. The former

strongest knight of the northern Woodlands had made a complete recovery.

“Haah!”

The angle of his blows, the timing with which he stepped in to swing... Shiran read all of this and slipped through the violent storm with the precision of threading a needle, all while continuously intercepting his attacks. And then...

“There!”

At the end of this tightrope act that none could imitate, she finally counterattacked.

“Guh?!”

Edgar repelled her sword, but not because he’d made it in time to block. Shiran’s blade had bounced off the black skin covering the Battle Ogre’s entire body with a metallic clang.

“Too weak!” Edgar roared.

His power even extended to defense. He not only had regular armor protecting him, but even the skin beneath was hard as steel. In contrast, Shiran had neither armor nor shield.

“I see... You’re awfully sturdy,” Shiran said calmly.

“And you’re awfully frail. You better be careful. One touch and you’ll go flying.”

Edgar was sure of his superiority, and his attacks grew even fiercer. Shiran dodged anything she couldn’t fend off in time, but she couldn’t evade everything.

Shiran’s cheek split apart as she continued repelling his attacks. Even though he’d only grazed her skin, the Battle Ogre’s hardy sword took chunks of meat with it. Next he wounded her arms, then her legs.

“Keep this up, and you’ll be minced meat!” Edgar declared with a villainous smile.

Just a look at his grin from the sidelines was enough to give me the chills, but even as he shaved away at her body, Shiran’s expression didn’t change one bit.

“No, that won’t happen at this rate,” she said.

Her tranquil expression was like a perfectly still lake, the disinterest apparent in her voice as she dealt with a torrent of attacks akin to a raging storm.

“What?” Edgar said, his eyes widening a little. “Your wounds...”

The gash across Shiran’s cheek was already gone. And that wasn’t all. Every wound on her body was sealing in a flash. As an undead monster, all her injuries regenerated.

“You damn monster...” Edgar muttered.

“A little late to curse that fact,” Shiran retorted nonchalantly. “Have all of you not come here chasing a ghoul?”

She wasn’t bothered by being called a monster; she’d already overcome that insecurity. No matter what happened to her body, she would always be a knight. So what did this new way of life grant her? Just maybe, the one who understood that best was her opponent.

“You think you’ve won?!” Edgar shouted, his expression twisting with anger as he struck with his sword. “Don’t look down on the Battle Ogre! I’ll smash that composed look right off your damn face! You can’t win if you can’t hurt me!”

It definitely wasn’t my imagination. He looked like he was trying to shake off a bad premonition.

“No, you’re wrong there too,” Shiran declared. “The fight only begins now.”

“Nonsense!”

An ogre who was indestructible and an undead monster who regenerated all wounds clashed once more. They were equal. Nobody could intervene in their ruthless and fierce conflict, and now that it’d reached this stage, the only thing I could do was believe in Shiran.

“Majima Takahiro...”

Just then, someone called to me. I shifted my eyes away from the battle, where I saw a bloodied Zoltan on his feet.

“You’re still alive...”

I was honestly surprised. Even after taking Shiran's attack, he was still clinging to life. And if he was approaching me, then...

"You still want to fight?" I asked.

I put my hand on the sword at my waist. Shiran was busy with the Battle Ogre, so she couldn't deal with anything else. I had to handle this myself. To be frank, I wasn't in any state to fight, drained of mana and blood as I was, but the same went for Zoltan. Actually, he was in worse shape than I was.

Half of his right arm was missing, and a deep gash ran down his collarbone. He was pressing on the wound with his left hand, but the blood showed no signs of stopping. He probably couldn't even hold a sword, let alone swing one. I could deal with this much myself. Contrary to my expectations, though, Zoltan didn't try to attack me.

"Be at ease. I don't plan on fighting," he said, shaking his head. "I have no reason to... Not anymore."

"What...?"

I was perplexed. There was a tranquil light behind his eyes that I hadn't expected. He showed no hostility, nor any fighting spirit. He truly had no intention of fighting anymore. So why was he going so far, enduring the pain of standing up with that wound, just to talk with me?

Zoltan faced my suspicious gaze head-on. "You never know what life has in store for you," he said. "I never believed I'd see a real savior with my own eyes."

"What are you spouting after coming all the way here to kill me?" I said, grimacing at his incongruous statement. "Besides, I'm not what you people call a savior. Don't misunderstand."

I was Shiran's savior; I'd sworn in my heart to be so. However, that oath only had value to the two of us. There was no room in it for anyone else.

"If you wanted to see a savior, then you should've visited the exploration team," I told him curtly. "They've got all the spectacular saviors you'd ever want."

“No, you’re a savior. At the very least, that is what I see,” Zoltan replied with a content yet bitter smile. “Fear. Suspicion. Envy. All around me, all I see are those filthy emotions. Even when I joined the Holy Order, those who are meant to be with the saviors, that didn’t change. Saviors and knights, they’re all a convenient fiction created for legends. That’s what I believed, but it looks like I was wrong.”

It was as if acknowledging us with his words had purged all his demons.

“If you desire each other as an absolute necessity, then the knight is no replaceable pawn, and the savior is no pawn either. There is something noble there. I’ve learned that today. If possible, I wish I could’ve met you sooner.”

“What...?”

I couldn’t hide my bewilderment. I didn’t know what he was thinking. How could I? Zoltan Michalek was an enemy I’d only met today. I knew nothing of him and had no way of knowing what he harbored in his heart.

Nonetheless, his heartfelt admiration for our way of life got through to me. It seemed Zoltan was different in nature from Travis’s other subordinates, and that realization brought a certain doubt to mind.

“Why do you work for a guy like Travis?”

I had no idea how many cruel acts Zoltan had witnessed under Travis’s command, but given Zoltan’s behavior now, I could see that he found such things repulsive. I thought it strange that he hadn’t quit being a knight.

“A good question. I don’t know why myself,” Zoltan said, chuckling. “It’s true that I wish I could’ve met you two sooner, but instead I met a terrifying ogre. That is also the truth.”

Zoltan spoke as if he’d found the answer he’d been looking for for years. And just then...

“Aaaargh?!”

Edgar shrieked. I returned my gaze to the battle. In the short time I hadn’t been watching, the scales had tipped significantly. Edgar had been incessantly attacking, but now he was on the back foot.

“You bitch...”

He carefully took a step away from Shiran, holding his upper arm. His hand was stained in blood, meaning his impregnable ogre defenses had been penetrated.

“Iron skin that repels swords. Your defensive strength is certainly troublesome, but that isn’t enough to stop my blade,” Shiran said, swinging the blood off her sword. “Don’t think that the ability to strengthen your body is uniquely yours.”

In response, the sprite by Shiran’s side danced in the air. It looked cheerful, twirling about like it was celebrating its contractor’s rebirth. It had deployed reinforcement magic to amplify Shiran’s strength. In other words, Shiran had been fighting on even ground against the Battle Ogre without any spirits supporting her up to this point.

“You’ve been...holding back?” Edgar asked in disbelief.

“No. Not really,” Shiran answered. “It simply took time for me to regain my sense for it.”

Edgar was speechless. I could understand why. The people of this world couldn’t experience a fight to the death with visitors who’d awakened to their powers, or any other beings similar to them. No matter how much one polished their skills, there was a limit because of the sheer difference in physical capabilities. To fight on equal ground, one had to amplify their physique to the point where skill could handle the rest. To that end, Shiran had had to use her full power as a spiritualist to fight Juumonji Tatsuya.

But now was different. Shiran’s body was already that of an undead monster, and now that she no longer denied it, she could draw out all of her strength as a monster. Her physical capabilities were far beyond what she’d had in life. She was still behind the Battle Ogre, but with her preeminent sword skills, she’d somehow closed the gap. So what would happen with a spirit’s support? The answer was playing out before my eyes.

“Grrr... Raaaah!”

Edgar roared, denying the reality before him. He stepped forth, and the

violent sound of steel hitting steel rang out. His attacks were like a surging wave. Edgar was on the offense, and Shiran on the defense. She blocked his enormous blade countless times and used every opening to riposte.

“Haaah!”

“Hgh!”

Each time, blood sprayed in the air, and the ogre groaned bitterly. Shiran’s attacks, which had been vainly bouncing off his skin before, could now tear the ogre’s muscles to shreds.

The combat techniques she’d acquired as a knight and spiritualist combined with the physical capabilities of an undead monster. After overcoming what had been agonizing her, Shiran had finally managed to reconcile these two facets within her. The true potential of the knight who’d sworn an oath to me was on full display now. An ogre with no real purpose couldn’t possibly beat her.

“Guh... Aargh...”

Edgar groaned and fell to a knee. His black, steellike skin was covered in countless cuts.

“Ugh... Goddammit...”

Victory was no longer in sight for him, but Edgar firmly held his sword. His bloodlust remained as strong as ever. Actually, his presence became even more fiendish.

“I don’t suppose you intend to surrender?” Shiran asked.

“Eat shit,” Edgar spat back. “I’m an ogre. I’m the strongest. So...” He stood up and stepped forward. “Die!”

He swung with the last of his strength. Metal hit metal, and Edgar’s sword flew back.

“Ah...”

The Battle Ogre had already long lost what strength he’d had.

“How unfortunate.”

Having repelled the ogre’s attack, Shiran turned her sword to cut him down.

Edgar couldn't resist anymore. Her blade came down on the ogre-shaped calamity. That was the end of the battle.

At least, that was what everyone thought, until we saw something jump in between them the instant before it could happen.

"Wha?!"

"Guh, gah... Hak."

Shiran cried out in shock, and the man who'd taken her blow coughed out blood. Edgar fell on his rear, his eyes wide.

"Zoltan?!"

Zoltan, who was supposed to be severely wounded, had taken Shiran's blade in Edgar's stead. Not a single person had noticed his approach, but that stood to reason. Zoltan specialized at moving between the gaps in others' perception.

As a result, he'd gotten between them successfully and saved Edgar from danger, but Zoltan now had a deep cut running from his shoulder halfway down his chest. The tip of the blade passed all the way through his back. It was a fatal wound.



“What the fuck was that for?!” Edgar roared.

Hearing his partner bellow with his teeth bared, Zoltan’s lips curved into a smile. “Who knows? I wonder why? I’m sure it was because I was blinded by a brilliant light.”

He narrowed his eyes as if there were something dazzling before him, staring at the person who’d cut him. There was no resentment, anger, or regret in his expression, only genuine determination.

“Everyone feared and shunned me. Having someone who wasn’t scared of me was salvation. Even if it was because he didn’t think anything of me, I still felt that way. That’s why I had to do this.”

We couldn’t understand what Zoltan said. He then threw something backhandedly at Edgar. It was a violet and black jewel. It seemed Edgar knew exactly what it was.

“Don’t you dare, you son of a—!”

The gem struck Edgar, and a black shadow erupted. He tried to say something, but the darkness swallowed him. After that, the ogre was gone without a trace. Then, as if all the threads holding him together had snapped, Zoltan collapsed.

“H-He vanished...?” I said, dumbfounded by the unexpected situation. “The shadow ate him...? No, teleported him?”

The violet gem had apparently been a magic tool for the purpose of an emergency retreat. That was when I realized something.

“Oh yeah... Travis’s group just appeared in the village. Did they also do that with that jewel?”

“Maybe,” Shiran agreed. “Having said that, I’ve never heard of magic capable of teleportation. Perhaps it’s a magic tool related to a great savior of the past.”

“A magic tool... If so, there’s probably more than one.”

“Agreed.”

“That means...” I started, knitting my brow at what I predicted would happen

next.

“Takahiro!”

A voice called my name. Lobivia, who was supposed to be fighting Travis, was running my way. She was in quite the rush. Her sash was crudely wrapped around her, and her clothes were in a mess. It was rather immodest.

“Are you okay, Takahiro?!”

“How about you, Lobivia?” I caught her tiny body as she hugged me with a tackle. “Well, you look energetic, at least.”

“Hmph. Of course I’m fine,” Lobivia answered, pouting and frowning at being treated like a child as I brushed her head. Then her expression suddenly twisted. “Sorry, Takahiro. That Travis guy got away.”

“Thought so...”

“That asshole used something weird. A big shadow ate him up, and then he was gone.”

So Travis really did have the same tool on him. He’d apparently used it to run away, sensing that he was in danger of dying.

Lobivia looked vexed, but she didn’t swat my hand away like she usually did, maybe because she unconsciously wanted someone to dote on her.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Takahiro...”

“We didn’t really want to kill Travis and all his men, anyway.”

Our goal was to overcome this crisis without losing anyone. We couldn’t forget that. I could feel Lily and Gerbera through the mental path. They’d completely annihilated the detached force and linked up with Rose. Seeing how they were all together, the main force was also done for. Travis had gotten away, but pretty much all of his subordinates were dead. The survivors wouldn’t be able to put up a proper fight anymore. They weren’t in any state to consider another assault either.

We’d managed to repulse the Fourth Company of the Holy Order. We would

have to consider our future relationship with the Holy Order itself, but this at least bought us some time.

I then noticed Zoltan stirring on the ground.

“Ma...jima...Takahiro, and...Lady...Shiran,” he said in a muffled voice.

Lobivia jumped in shock. “Whoa! This guy’s still kicking?!”

Zoltan had simply looked like a corpse.

“It’s fine, Lobivia,” I said, lowering my eyes to Zoltan. “There’s no need to be on guard against him.”

Edgar had gotten away because of him, but I couldn’t bring myself to finish Zoltan off. He didn’t seem properly conscious to begin with.

“A true...savior and knight... Heed me... There is...a darkness...in this world... A darkness...called reality...that nothing...can be done about...” Zoltan continued in a delirium. “Marshal Harrison... Vice Marshal Gordon...good people...but even so...to protect the world... But you two...might be able to...prevail...”

His words gradually became more and more unintelligible, and I was having problems hearing him. His very last words sounded like he was speaking to himself.

“Bonded...hearts... Overlapping...souls... Aah. So that way...existed too...” His eyes were unfocused, staring at something only he could see. “Just that...has saved...me...”

Zoltan’s voice cut off, and his breathing stopped. I kneeled in front of him and closed his eyes. I’d crossed blades with him, but I hadn’t sensed any lies in his dying words. I’d only felt genuine concern for us.

“Darkness, huh...?”

What did Zoltan know? It worried me, but I had no way of probing him for answers anymore. If there was one thing I knew for certain, it was that he believed that we had the strength to beat this darkness if it came upon us.

“Takahiro, over there,” Shiran said, looking off into the distance.

“Masteeeeer!”

Lily, Gerbera, and Rose were running our way. I could see Gerbera waving both her hands energetically. Behind us, I could hear Kei noisily coming down the stairs and Ayame yipping. We’d managed to bring this battle to an end without losing anyone. Right now, that was worth celebrating.

“Takahiro...”

I was holding Lobivia’s hand as I waited for everyone to arrive, when Shiran nestled up against my side. She was closer to me than ever before.

“Do you remember my oath?” she asked willfully, giving me a beautiful yet bashful smile. “No matter what calamity should show itself in your path, I shall cut it down with my sword.”

“Yeah, I believe in you,” I replied, feeling a little embarrassed by the emotions behind her eye.

And so we waited, our shoulders pushed together, until our companions safely reached us.

Chapter 19: The Fate of the Trampled

Having successfully escaped the village, Travis headed to the rendezvous point they'd decided on beforehand. None of his subordinates who'd infiltrated the village with him were here; all of them had been killed by the dragon. Regardless, Travis had many other subordinates, and the Holy Gaze's curse had yet to be lifted from the Great White Spider. If he could meet up with the others, they could rally together. So Travis believed...until he was faced with reality, that is.

"What...the...?"

He forgot to maintain his usual elegant act and mumbled in a daze. Before him were about twenty of his subordinates, all of them a tattered mess.

"Wha... Wh-What happened?! Someone! Someone give me a report right now!"

Of the approximately two hundred knights of the Holy Order's Fourth Company, this was all that had returned from the attack on Shiran's reclamation village.

The main force that had assaulted the front gate had suffered severe casualties from two volleys of Rose's trump card, the combat fireworks. After reinforcing their magic defenses and pushing again, they'd suffered a third volley. Rose had held nothing back. They'd taken less damage than the first round, but their defenses had come undone. They could've broken through had they kept going, but they'd had no idea how many more times Rose would attack them with a rain of fire. Instead, the main force had been forced to retreat again. In response, Rose had abandoned the line of defense. She'd retreated while sporadically counterattacking to slow her pursuers until, eventually, Gerbera and Lily arrived and routed the main force entirely.

As for the detached force, not a single knight had returned. About ten survivors had gotten away from Gerbera and Lily's ambush, but unfortunately for them, they'd gone through a trackless path in the forest. Scattered and

frantic, they'd had no idea which way they were going. Given the nature of the Woodlands, their safety was highly unlikely. If aid could've been sent out, it would've been another matter, but the Fourth Company no longer had the capacity to do so—not that their commander was one to consider such measures in the first place.

“F-Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fucking dammit!”

Travis tore at his hair. He didn't care about his dead subordinates, but the Fourth Company being on the verge of annihilation as a whole was unacceptable. He would lose his position as commander, after all.

Until today, Travis had walked the path to glory. He'd been born with a superpower, and he had an exceptional sense for combat. He was the type to pay no heed to those he knocked down along the way. Because of this, he'd risen to the utmost heights. He'd received the greatest honor in the world by being named the commander of the Fourth Company of the Holy Order, and he'd naturally seen his appointment as a matter of course. It was vexing that there were still a few commanders above him, but he'd decided that he would one day drag them all down from their podiums. However, his path to glory was now blocked off.

“Like hell I'll let this stand!”

Whose fault was this? Whom could he blame? Travis's eyes darted around, and then he punched the knight who'd been given command of the main force.

“You! It's all your fault! What will you do about this?!”

Without giving the man any time to resist, Travis started kicking. The knight screamed, but Travis kept driving his foot in over and over. The other knights didn't try to stop him. None of them were the type to stick up for someone else, and all of them feared being the next target of Travis's rage.

“The hell're you up to?”

That was when Edgar returned.

“Edgar Guivarch... You came back, I see,” Travis said, glaring at Edgar with bloodshot eyes. “You're late. Why didn't you come back to us in the village?”

“We encountered Majima Takahiro and Lady Shiran.”

“Did you kill them?”

“Just as you can see, we failed.”

“Where’s Zoltan?”

“Dead,” Edgar answered bluntly, plopping down at the base of a tree.

“I see. And then you came shamelessly crawling back on your own, huh?”

He was one to talk, but nobody was going to point that out. Edgar also said nothing and simply stared at the ground.

Seeing the gashes all over Edgar’s body, Travis sneered. “Look at you after all that boasting. To think you’d fail to kill one woman who was already on the verge of death. Now we know the Battle Ogre’s limits.”

Travis mentally cursed Edgar out, finding him useless. The Battle Ogre’s ability was powerful, but it still had constraints. After using it too much, it couldn’t be activated again for a while. Each and every one of them was useless. He was surrounded by useless idiots.

Travis suppressed the urge to disparage everyone present. It still wasn’t too late. He had to calm down. There was a way to turn this around. He had an idea.

“Edgar Guivarch... I shall give you a chance to restore your honor,” he said, his voice gentle but his eyes like ice.

Edgar still had a use, and Travis could change his demeanor to whatever suited the situation so long as he had a plan.

“At this rate, you won’t be able to calm down, right? Are you sure it’s fine to leave the Battle Ogre’s reputation so tarnished?”

His tone was calm, but in essence, he was fanning the flames. Edgar remained seated, though, which Travis found strange. Edgar had a violent temperament; he wasn’t the type to laugh and accept defeat. In this situation, he would normally be raging, yet here he was, strangely docile.

Had he lost his nerve? If so, that was a bit of a problem. Travis couldn’t let this

idiot remain an idiot without at least having him rampage around. Things were going to be pretty bad for him at this rate, so Travis started thinking of what to say next, when suddenly...

“Aah... That’s right. I gotta pay back what’s owed, huh?” Edgar muttered, his voice deep. “I won’t forgive any of them.”

Travis didn’t feel relieved to finally get a response. Rather, he felt a chill from the emotions behind that voice. Edgar wasn’t in low spirits. Not at all. He was seething with rage like never before.

“I fought someone strong. Yeah, that’s it. I got to wield my power like crazy, and I wanted to butcher them. Losing and getting killed would’ve definitely been humiliating, but crawling back alive like this is the greatest humiliation of all.”

His negative emotions came pouring out like mud. Even without taking the form of one, he had a terrifying presence that made it known to all that Edgar Guivarch was a real ogre.

“I’ll absolutely pay them all back.”

“Edgar...”

Travis perceived what was going through Edgar’s head and secretly snickered to himself, but he didn’t let a single whisper of this slip through his lips.

“Yes. You’re right. There’s no way a loss to the Wicked Monster Tamer and the Repulsive Ghoul can be allowed for the great Battle Ogre,” Travis said, walking up to Edgar and holding out his hand. “Let us kill Majima Takahiro together. I shall prepare the stage for you.”

Burning anger—Travis could use such emotion. When applied correctly in an act of reckless desperation, it could manifest normally impossible explosive power. It was risky, but Travis didn’t give a damn.

Burn out your life for my sake. I’ll use you to the last drop of blood. That is your one and only pur—

“Sorry. Not a chance.”

“Huh?”

Travis had started scheming for the future already, so Edgar's refusal caught him off guard. His thoughts froze for just an instant. Using that opening, the ogre swung his giant blade, tearing through the air.

"Guh?! Gaaaargh?!"

Travis let out an ear-piercing shriek and fell to the ground, rolling about with both hands to his face.

"Aaaaaah?!"

Blood spattered everywhere, but it was far too little to have come from a proper sword wound. At the very least, it wasn't fatal. Nevertheless, that strike had stolen something that could never be recovered.

"My eyes?! My eeeeeeyes?!"

"I already told you. I'm gonna pay all those fuckers back," Edgar said, swaying to his feet. "Everything started with you, yeah?"

Edgar's talent for the blade was truly terrifying. Even if Travis had been negligent and caught off guard, Edgar had stolen the eyes of "Travis of the Holy Gaze." None of the knights so much as budged at the sudden violence. They remained speechless and stared at the point of Edgar's wet blade. Edgar remained expressionless except for his eyes, which glittered with a dangerous light. He was like a revenant.

"Gaaaaaah! Have you gone mad?! Edgaaaar?!"

"Shut the fuck up," Edgar said, kicking Travis in the mouth with disinterest.

"Hgh! G-Gah..."

Travis blacked out, his broken teeth tumbling to the ground.

"Don't bitch about this being unreasonable," Edgar said, walking up to the fallen commander. "You were the one trying to force this on someone else."

"U-Ugh..."

"Relax. I won't kill you. You still have a use and all. I'll use you right to your last drop of blood," Edgar said coldly as he looked down at Travis. "Honestly, I don't like doing things like this. Still, I've seen it plenty of times from the

sidelines, thanks to you. I know how it's done. Riiiiight, Travis?"

Travis had kept Edgar in his company because he was a convenient soldier who'd wanted no honor, money, or status. As a result, Edgar knew Travis's ways very well. Even if he didn't like this method and didn't specialize in it, he could imitate it if he put his mind to it.

Edgar had said that he wouldn't kill him. He'd said he would use him to the last drop of blood, meaning it would be hell. Travis's face contorted, completely unrelated to the pain he felt.

"A-Aaah... W-Wait!"

"Just go to sleep."

Edgar kicked Travis's head like a ball, and he finally went silent. Then he grabbed Travis's arm and dragged him along the ground. Nobody tried to save their commander. They were all desperate to keep the Battle Ogre's focus away from them, so even though they all heard him, no one reacted.

"'Savior,' my ass," Edgar muttered. "Dying with that satisfied smirk on your face. Don't go doing things on your goddamn own."

He was complaining to nobody in particular. Or perhaps there was something else to it.

"I'm gonna pay what's owed, Zoltan. For your part too..."

With that, Edgar vanished, dragging Travis deep into the forest.

Chapter 20: A Special Relationship Just Between Us

“Takahiro, may I have a moment?”

“Shiran? Sure. Come in.”

I sat up from bed and faced Shiran as she entered the room. She looked at me with a smile, a special kind of affection behind it.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Just fine. Although, it’s a little awkward that everyone is treating me like a patient,” I replied, smiling bitterly.

“No complaining, My Lord,” Gerbera, who’d been keeping me company at my bedside, said with a sour look. “You’re still in poor condition.”

“I mean...I’m just short a little blood, and my mana was all used up, right?”

“‘Sucked up’ would be more appropriate,” Gerbera corrected.

“Um, sorry for being a bother,” Shiran said bashfully, curling in on herself as the person responsible for sucking my blood.

“There’s nothing for you to apologize for,” Gerbera said, cocking her head. “You were moments from dying of starvation and saw a gourmet meal before your eyes. It’s only natural you’d pounce on it.”

“I-I didn’t really pounce or anything, though...” Shiran replied faintly, shrinking back even more.

She must’ve remembered something. Shiran didn’t have much experience as a girl, so she was very innocent. When she reacted like this, I felt embarrassed too.

“Oh, now that I think of it, you’re right,” Gerbera said, nodding firmly. “I’m impressed. I have no confidence I’d be able to hold back. I’m doing my best to hold back right now as it is.”

“Aren’t you holding back the wrong desire?” I said, my eyes half-closed.

“A-Anyway,” Gerbera said, averting her gaze, “people don’t recover so easily from abusing their body to its limit. You must recuperate, My Lord. Just get some rest for the day.”

“I know...”

“In fact, Katou has strictly instructed me not to take my eyes off you,” Gerbera added. “I’ll get scolded if you start moving around, so please spare me that...”

Gerbera put her hands to her head and started trembling. She was just as scared as always, but the two of them got along unexpectedly well, so I didn’t understand why she was acting like that.

“In any case, what did you come for, Shiran?” Gerbera asked, changing the topic.

“Ah yes. About that, I came to—”

“Oh! I get it!”

Gerbera suddenly came to a realization, like an imaginary light bulb had lit up above her. Incidentally, it was a different matter entirely whether she *actually* got it.

“I shall excuse myself for a bit!”

With that, Gerbera unfolded her legs and immediately went out into the relatively small hallway—for her, at least—with unexpected dexterity. Seeing her like that reminded me that she was a spider.

“Looks like she misunderstood,” I said. What happened to Katou telling her to keep an eye on me? “Whatever. So? What did you need, Shiran?”

“Right. I came to tell you of the village’s situation. Do you have the time?”

“As you can see, I’ve got all the time in the world. Could you fill me in on the details?”

I pointed Shiran to a chair, then listened as she told me about the state of the village. First, of the severely wounded villagers we’d been sheltering, four had survived. Dennis and two others had been fine to begin with, and there were nine children. Altogether, we’d saved sixteen villagers. That wasn’t enough to

maintain an entire village, though. Any monster attack would lead to annihilation.

Normally, it would be time to consider moving to another village immediately, but we were staying here too. We could repulse any normal monsters, so there was no need to evacuate right this moment. The villagers would have to migrate, considering the situation, but we could do so after consulting the neighboring Rapha first.

Currently, Lily was minding the injured, and Lobivia and Ayame were on guard outside the village. Rose and Katou were in charge of repairing the village's facilities, while Shiran and Kei were discussing the future with the survivors.

"I made the rounds before coming here. It seems all is going well," Shiran said.

"That's good. Looks like the Holy Order isn't coming either, so we can relax for now..."

But something was bothering me a little. Soon after the battle was over, the Holy Gaze's curse had been lifted from Gerbera. Lobivia said that Travis had gotten away, so it was unexpected of him to remove it.

It was convenient for us, but it left me curious. It was possible Travis had cut it off himself, seeing as there was a limit to how many targets he could cast it on, or maybe there was a limit to how far away he could be. Nothing would come from thinking about it, though. If we were going to worry about the Holy Order, reconciling with them as a whole was more important than concerning ourselves with the nearly annihilated Fourth Company.

All the same, how could we get in contact with the Holy Order's upper brass? One idea that came to mind was contacting the Akerian royal family. The victims of this incident, the villagers of Kehdo, were citizens of Aker, so the royal family was, in a way, a concerned party. I needed to negotiate with them in order to get aid for the villagers who'd been hurt by Travis's rampage too. Still, that would take time. Right now, we had to get some rest and help out at the village however we could.

"Um, Takahiro?" Shiran said, interrupting my thoughts.

“What is it?” I asked, but she then averted her eye. “What?”

“Oh. Um... It’s hard to say...”

She was being evasive. I cocked my head, wondering what it was, and she continued little by little.

“During the battle yesterday, I crossed swords with Edgar. He was a difficult enemy, and I had to use all my strength.”

“Yeah. It was a splendid battle.”

“Thank you very much... Oh. No. Um, not that. I mean...”

Shiran furrowed her brow. Her eye darted about the whole time. Her behavior was clearly suspicious, and a bit of shyness hid behind her expression.

“What I’m saying is, I used all my strength... That’s the main point. In other words, I used up a significant amount of mana.”

“So...what?” I had a rough idea of what she was getting at now, and I started to feel embarrassed too. Gerbera’s consideration was unexpectedly right on the mark. “You’re hungry?”

Shiran hesitated for a moment, then said in the quietest of voices, “Yes... B-But it’s not that I’m simply hungry. Th-That would be fine if left as is, but, I mean, it’s not entirely out of the question for Travis to attack again, and since we should maintain our forces, I was thinking it’d be a bad idea to remain mana deficient, so...I was worried about what to do.”

Though her girlish qualities were taking center stage, she maintained her serious, knightly nature.

“Well, I don’t mind if you come to me just because you’re hungry...”

“B-But, Takahiro, you’re not in good health. Given the current situation, wouldn’t it be better for you to stay in top condition?”

“Oh, right. You...have a point there. We don’t know what can happen. That’s true.”

“I doubt you’ve recovered much blood in just one day, so...um, I was thinking of, uh, maybe getting by with another method... That way, even if I can’t get as

much mana as with blood, I'll at least be able to wield my sword..."

Shiran quickly glanced at my lips, then averted her gaze again. That was her limit. She held her hand to her mouth, hiding her own lips, and fell silent. Even so, after that, it was obvious what she was getting at.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room. If this were Lily, she'd be sweetly coaxing me, but even allowing for the difference in their characters, this was very hard for Shiran given her personality. Still, she was serious to a fault, so she must've figured something had to be done. That was why she'd taken action, no matter how embarrassing it was.

My personality was similar to hers, so I understood her well in this regard. Nonetheless, it was because of this similarity that we remained awkwardly silent. Both Lily and Gerbera were really assertive, so this was a first for me. Naturally, Shiran wasn't Lily or Gerbera, therefore we had to establish our relationship on our own.

Yesterday, I'd responded to Shiran's feelings as a knight, but I still hadn't given an answer to her feelings as a girl. That was inadequate. Yesterday wasn't the time for it, but putting it on hold indefinitely would be insincere. I sat up and moved to the edge of my bed.

"Takahiro..."

I put my hand to her face. Her eye glistened as she turned my way. I stroked her cold and smooth cheek, and her eye narrowed happily as I stared right into its blue depths.

"Please hear me out, Shiran. I—"

We'd disagreed many times up until now.

There were times we hadn't noticed what the other was thinking.

There were times we misunderstood each other.

This time, there would be none of that.

I clearly conveyed to her the feelings we both shared.

Extra Story: A Novice as a Girl *Shiran's POV*

On an evening a short while after Travis's Fourth Company of the Holy Order had attacked...

"Oh. Shiran. Found you."

I turned from the conversation I was having in the living room to the voice that had called me. Lily came in from the hallway with a carefree smile. Her eyes then shifted to my conversation partner.

"Sorry for interrupting your chat, Dennis."

"It's all right. We just finished," Dennis replied politely.

He already knew Lily's identity, but there was no disdain or fear in his voice. His face only expressed his honest gratitude for being saved.

"Well then, Lady Shiran, I will excuse myself here," Dennis said, turning back to me and bowing. "I apologize for taking up your time with such idle chatter."

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet your expectations," I replied.

"It's fine. I understand your position. You've convinced me."

Dennis left with a smile. After glancing at him as he passed her, Lily looked at me, curious.

"Umm, was it something serious?" she asked. "Oh, it's fine if you don't tell me."

"No, it was nothing like that."

She was trying to be considerate, but there was no need.

"It was nothing, really," I said, lightly waving my hand. "Dennis asked me to be the village chief."

"Hmm. The chief, huh...? Hey! That's super important!" Lily exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"So he requested, but I refused," I said, smiling bitterly.

“Oh. You refused. Now that you mention it, it did seem that way at the end there. But why not accept?”

“It doesn’t make sense to begin with. Kei is the family heir.”

Had he not died so young, my brother would’ve served as the chief. As his daughter, Kei was the legitimate heir. She wasn’t all that much younger than me either, so I wasn’t going to needlessly invite chaos.

“Besides...even if she wasn’t, I would’ve refused. I don’t have the confidence that I can fulfill the duties of a chief.”

“Is it that hard a job?”

“No, not in that sense. It’s true that the job of a village chief isn’t easy, but I was speaking more from a point of sincerity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right now, before all else, I am Takahiro’s knight.”

I’d already sworn an oath for how I would conduct my life, and a knight’s oath held priority above all else. That said, I still considered everyone from Kehdo my precious brethren, so I wouldn’t make light of their feelings. That remained as it always had been. In addition, I was convinced that Takahiro would pay due consideration to Kehdo. However, in this case, that wasn’t the main problem.

“The chief must think of the village above all else. As I am now, I can’t fulfill that duty. To take on that responsibility would be insincere to the villagers.”

“Aah. That’s what you meant,” Lily said after blinking and letting out a sigh. There was an impish light in her attractive eyes. “That’s, like, how do I put it? Some serious bragging about your love life?”

“M-M-M-My...” I was speechless and stunned. “N-No. L-Lily. Th-That isn’t what I meant. I mean...”

I tried to make excuses, but I couldn’t even speak properly.

“Hee hee. I know. It was a joke,” Lily said, smiling.

“Th-That’s fine, then...”

I sighed with relief. I’d only recently acknowledged that I was also just a girl,

and this was my first time being in love. I had very little experience, and that was on full display now. Responding with a light joke of my own would've been fine, but I couldn't manage that. I pulled myself back together, then tried to get the conversation back on track.

"In any case, with the village in this state, we were discussing what to do if we were to rebuild. If we do, I'm planning to support the village from the outside."

Even as Takahiro's knight, there were things I could do for the village. In fact, there were many things I could do with the freedom to move about outside. I'd refused Dennis's proposition, but I planned on granting his wish in another form. I'd conveyed this to him too, and he'd understood. That was when Lily had entered the room.

"Now that I think of it, what did you come here for, Lily?"

"Oh, right," she said, clapping her hands as she remembered. "It overlaps a bit with what we were talking about. Leah has decided on her plans, so I came to tell you."

"Auntie? Meaning..."

"Mm-hm. She'll be going back to Rapha for a bit tomorrow."

"I see. Thank you for informing me."

The village was currently in a bit of a lull. The wounded were stable, and we'd sorted things out to the point where they could live normal lives. It was hard to imagine Travis launching another attack with the large majority of his subordinates dead too. Using that time, my aunt was considering whether to return to Rapha.

Her goal was to consult my uncle Melvin about what to do with Kehdo. Furthermore, she planned to contact the Akerian royal family through the army stationed at Diospyro. This incident concerned all of Aker, and normally, the royal family should've dealt with it. Takahiro had simply done so in their stead. We needed to exchange information, and if possible, move toward getting their cooperation.

Also, we had to inform the country of the village's state and request aid. The choice of whether to revive the village, like we'd been discussing, or abandon it

and migrate the survivors to Rapha, would largely depend on whether the country provided aid. Strictly speaking, we couldn't move until that decision was made.

"It will take time to contact the royal family," I said. "I suppose it's prudent to move quickly."

"Yup. Also, even if we make contact, it'll still take time to get things settled. I guess we'll be staying here doing what we can in the meantime."

"I'll have to ask that you all safeguard the village during your stay," I said, sighing. "It pains me to rely on you for so much, but there's no other choice. I have no idea how I can possibly repay you..."

"Aah, none of that, Shiran. You're acting like you're a stranger to us," Lily said with a pout. Though her gesture was childish, her eyes admonished me. "My master doesn't think that way either."

"You're right..."

I nodded in earnest. I had a bad habit of acting that way. I knew this, but I couldn't stop myself. I was grateful that Lily had pointed it out like this.

"I'll be careful," I said.

"Mhm."

Lily smiled gently. She was the eldest sister among Takahiro's servants, so there was a certain air of magnanimity behind her expression. In a sense, I was also her little sister. I'd never thought of it that way before, but now I didn't deny being a monster. In other words, I also wanted a connection to Lily and the other girls. I'd spent the last few years as Kei's guardian and acted like her older sister, but I'd spent my childhood being a little sister, so this felt nostalgic.

"Also, about Leah's escort," Lily added, "my master decided that Lobivia and I will tag along. Lobivia complained a little, though."

"It means being separated from Takahiro for a while, after all. If only I could go myself."

"Don't worry about it. As you are now, you can't leave my master's side."

It wasn't to the extent of Asarina, who was a parasite in his body, and Salvia,

who'd joined with him as part of their contract, but I also depended on Takahiro now. I'd be fine for a few days without any fighting, but in order to prepare for the worst, I needed to stay by his side.

"You could get weaker if you leave him, but conversely, you're the strongest among us so long as you're by his side. It's just for a few days, but I'll be away, so I'll need you to be with him."

The strongest fighters in our little group were Lily, Gerbera, and myself. Gerbera's strength was stable at all times. My strength was temporary, boosted with the support of my contracted spirits and my power as an undead monster. Lily had the breadth to deal with many kinds of enemies and situations, and she excelled at dealing a single tremendous blow with a giant surge of mimicked monsters. It was the right choice to have Gerbera and me stay behind. I understood the logic behind this, but...

"What's wrong, Shiran?" Lily asked. "You're making a weird face."

"I don't know how to put it. I just...feel a little awkward."

"Awkward? What about?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Because staying by Takahiro's side, um...makes me happy."

A beat later, Lily nodded in understanding. "Ooh. You feel awkward because it's awfully convenient for you? Come on, you don't have to care about that."

"But, Lily..."

"Oh, I'm not trying to be considerate or anything, just so you know. I mean, I don't like the idea of leaving my master's side either, but I plan on having him make it up to me."

"Make it up, you say?"

"Tee hee. Having an excuse to make him dote on me is actually a plus, you know?"

A smile took shape over her lovely features. She looked so happy, as though her mimicry could come undone at any moment.

"I see..."

In that sense, I'd been too anxious about the situation. I had no idea what she was planning to ask of him, but I had a feeling that it would be a lot of work for Takahiro. I was a little worried, and also...a little jealous.

I'd confessed my love, but I couldn't get intimate with Takahiro unless I used resupplying my mana as an excuse. Part of me wanted to be more assertive like Lily was, but I had no idea how to go about it. I always ended up being so indecisive. The courage I needed to fight in battle as a gallant knight was different from the courage I needed as a girl. The thought brought a sigh to my lips.

Before I knew it, I realized Lily had been staring at me.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Nope. Nothing," Lily answered with a shake of her head. It felt like there was something, but she wasn't going to say it. "At any rate, Shiran, if you're gonna be like that, then I'm a little worried."

"What do you mean?"

"About how you said you feel awkward and all. It's 'cause you're so reserved. Don't hold back when it comes to asking my master for mana, okay? There's no need to do so when you need blood, of course, but I mean for making out too."

"I-I won't..."

She said it so frankly to my face that I felt a little shaken. Not that I was lying. I'd just recently caused everyone a lot of trouble due to a mana shortage. Now that I'd settled my feelings about being a monster, I had no intention of repeating the same mistake. As a matter of fact, I'd already mustered my courage and asked Takahiro for mana through a kiss.

"Oh, but now that I think of it..." I began.

"Hm? Did something happen?" Lily asked.

"Ummm... No. It doesn't really have anything to do with holding back."

"Whatever. Just tell me. I'll give you any advice you need."

I wondered if this was really all right, but feeling awkward about this kind of thing was another bad habit of mine. I remembered what Lily had told me and

decided to go ahead and ask.

“Just as you know, my body produces no heat,” I started, still somewhat hesitant. “Therefore, um, whenever I touch Takahiro, I worry...it feels unpleasant for him.”

“I don’t think so,” Lily said after blinking a few times.

“Really?”

“Mm-hm. My master isn’t the type to care about that kinda thing,” she said with confidence, but then her expression turned pensive. “Well, I say that, but if it worries you, it worries you. You’ve got your own circumstances and all. Everyone has different things that bother them.”

Fully understanding my feelings, she sank into thought for a while.

“Oh!”

Her expression suddenly brightened; she’d apparently thought of something. She then smiled impishly. That bothered me, but before I could ask, Lily looked me in the eye.

“Resolving that is simple. In short—”



“Shiran?” Mana greeted me as I opened the door, her childish face highlighted by curiosity. “Did something happen?”

“There was something I wanted to get,” I answered.

After parting ways with Lily, I dropped by the room Rose was using. Just as always, Rose had been talking with Mana while she worked. The two of them really did get along well.

“I’m glad you’re here too, Mana,” I said. “I was hoping you could help me look for something. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. What is it?”

Mana managed our luggage over the course of our journey. It was faster to just ask her when looking for something specific.

After she got what I asked for, Rose looked down at the goods. “A tub meant

for bathing and a runestone?”

“Yes. May I borrow them?”

“Please, go ahead,” Rose said pleasantly. “I have several spares. You may even keep them. It’s rare for you to use these, though.”

“It is,” I agreed.

It was true; I pretty much never bathed. If I needed to, I managed with cold water. I didn’t have to worry about catching a cold anymore, and a hot bath didn’t bring any pleasure, seeing as there was no blood circulation in me to improve. Nevertheless, I’d dropped by to retrieve these because of Lily’s suggestion. If my body was cold, then I could simply warm it up from the outside. It was so simple a solution that I wondered why I’d never thought of it before.

To that end, these tools Rose had created were very convenient. With a little mana, I could draw a bath just a little hotter than normal body temperature. I could use magic myself, but using magic tools that made the adjustment for me was far easier. In any case, I didn’t normally use these, so it drew their attention.

“Did something happen?” Rose asked. She quickly glanced at me, but she couldn’t spot anything. “It doesn’t look as if you’ve gotten dirty.”

I only wanted to heat up my body, but it was embarrassing to admit that when it was all for a kiss.

“I have a sudden need for it, is all,” I answered, dodging the question and turning on my heels. “Then, please excuse me. I have business with Takahiro.”

With that, I quickly started to leave the room.

“With my master...?” Rose muttered curiously.

“I’ll explain it to you later, Rose,” Mana said.

She’d apparently realized my intentions and would take my place explaining things. That was embarrassing too, but it was better than saying it myself. Honestly, I had no idea how Mana figured it out. Admiring her usual wisdom, I passed through the door, when I heard Mana’s voice once more.

“Good luck!”

“Huh?”

I didn’t understand, but by that time, the door had already closed behind me. I found it strange, but not enough to go back inside and ask. Besides, it would be uncomfortable if I got stuck having to explain things.

Deciding not to worry about it, I carried the bathing set I’d gotten from Rose and hurried back to my own room.



After filling the large tub with hot water, I submerged myself inside it. I then added as much water as the tub could hold and soaked as much of my body as possible. In truth, I couldn’t feel myself warming up. I didn’t have much of a sense for heat. The reason I could feel body heat from others was likely that, as an undead, I was mistaking life force, mana, or the like for warmth instead.

Hot, cold, warm, chilly—these concepts were foreign to me now. There’d been a time when this change would have stressed me, but thinking back on it now, maybe that had been another reason I’d avoided taking baths. Now that I had overcome those hurdles, I didn’t mind. Actually, I was focusing on something else entirely.

“I’m covered in scars...”

I ran my fingers over the right side of my face. I could feel the scar carved into my skin. After I turned into an undead, my wounds healed immediately without leaving a trace, but the scars from before still remained. During the battle at Fort Tilia, my left arm had been cut off, my waist had been torn open, and a sword had been thrust in between my breasts. All of these wounds had left large scars across my body. There were many other scars from my days fighting in the Woodlands too.

As a knight, I didn’t care. I even felt proud of them. They were proof that I’d protected what was dear to me to the end. As a girl, however, I felt differently about them. What would Takahiro think if he saw these?

I was sure he wouldn’t pay them any mind, and Lily had said so too. He wasn’t the type to worry about such things. I knew that. I really did. But, even so, I

couldn't help but worry, and my mood turned melancholic.

As those thoughts filled my mind, I suddenly started questioning what I was even thinking and got embarrassed. Regardless, that was what it meant to show one's body. I was afraid I was going to start imagining very specific things, so I drowned out my thoughts in a panic. My heart was a mess. I still wasn't used to being a girl.

"This should be enough..."

Judging that I'd been in the bath for an adequate amount of time, I got out and quickly finished my preparations. I didn't don my usual knight outfit, and instead put on a feminine dress. I did keep my sword with me, though. I couldn't calm down without it, and I had to be prepared just in case. My appearance looked unbalanced with it, but this was my identity.

As I was getting ready, Kei returned to our room.

"Oh. You're rather late," I said.

"Umm, I was talking with Lobivia."

"Is that so? It's nice that you're getting along. Oh, right. I just happened to use the bath, so feel free to use it next."

"Oh, look at that. Maybe I will... Huh? But why?"

Kei had the same suspicion as Rose, but since I'd just finished my preparations, I started to leave the room.

"Well then, after you finish bathing, be sure to get some sleep before it's too late. I have some business with Takahiro right now."

"With Takahiro...?" Kei cocked her head. She looked at me, at the hot water in the tub, and back at me again. Her face turned noticeably red, then she darted toward me. "R-R-R-R-R-Really?! Finally!"

"Huh? Finally...?"

"Oh! But in that case, shouldn't you pretty yourself up a bit more?! I have some cute things you can use!"

Kei huffed in determination. She was acting a little strange, but with her so

excited, I had no room to cut in. If she were acting like this as a squire, I'd have had to warn her about it, but Kei seemed very girly right now. In the time I spent hesitating over how to deal with this, she'd already sprung into action.

"Here! This!"

"A...ribbon?"

I was perplexed by what she pulled out of her luggage. It was a beautiful large ribbon. I'd never worn anything like it before. For me, ornaments were basically just magic tools in the shape of rings, bracelets, and the like. Even I could admit that those had no sex appeal whatsoever, but the important thing was practicality and durability.

"I'm sure this will suit you," Kei said.

"But..."

"I'll put it on for you!"

It was no good. My words were falling on deaf ears. Her usual courteous mannerisms were gone, and she was now acting very much like a girl her age. That said, maybe I didn't rebuke her because her suggestion had rocked my heart somewhat. If I was going to go see Takahiro, then it would be better to dress up more. I wanted to, and it felt kind of good to think of it like that.

"Very well..."

Kei looked like she was having fun too, so I decided it was fine to let her do as she liked sometimes. I relaxed my body and left it to her.



After spending some time dressing up, I found myself standing in front of Takahiro's room. I could feel the unfamiliar weight of the ribbon Kei had tied at the back of my head. It was a strip of fabric, inconceivably light compared to a sword, but its weight mysteriously drew my mind all the more. I nearly reached back to touch it on reflex, but I stopped when I remembered that Kei had arranged it for me. I hated the idea of messing it up.

I took a deep breath. The undead didn't need to breathe, but habits that had been ingrained in one's body for years didn't break so easily. I mustered all my

courage and knocked on the door.

“Is now a good time, Takahiro?” I called.

“Shiran? Sure, come on in,” he replied immediately.

“Excuse me.”

My preparations were perfect. I took a step into the room. It seemed he’d been inspecting his equipment, because he stood at a small table, his bracers and a knife sitting atop it.

“Did you need something?” he asked. “If you’re looking for Leah, Lily was...”

Takahiro paused, and an unnatural silence filled the room. His eyes were fixed directly on me. Did I look strange in some way? I was panicking like mad on the inside, but I remained casual as I looked myself over.

Mm. Nothing out of place...I think. Warm steam rose from my skin. I’d heated myself to the core. I’d feared that drying my hair would cool me down after going through the trouble to get warm, so it was still a little damp. I’d combed it, so I didn’t think it looked unsightly.

“Did you take a bath...?” Takahiro finally asked.

“Huh? Yes, I did.”

My reply came a beat late because, in my head, I’d simply been warming up my body. In a sense, it wasn’t all that different from putting cold soup on the fire, but now that I thought about it, it was the same as regular bathing.

“I used one to warm myself up.”

“I see. That’s...unusual.”

His reaction felt a little strange. Takahiro seemed puzzled. He looked bewildered, and maybe a little embarrassed too. However, if that was the case, what was making him bewildered and embarrassed? I couldn’t think of anything, so perhaps I was misreading him.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No. Nothing.”

Takahiro intentionally coughed, lightly shook his head, and mouthed, “It can’t

be,” to himself.

“So? What did you need?” he asked, acting as he usually did.

It was embarrassing to be asked that, but I’d gone down this path once already. I clenched my fists and left everything to momentum—not that I was able to eradicate my embarrassment by doing so.



“U-Um, I was thinking of asking...for a mana resupply.”

“A resupply...?” Takahiro repeated, his face stiffening.

“Y-Yes.” He wasn’t asking for clarification, and that only made me more embarrassed, but I forced myself to continue. “That’s why I made these preparations.”

“By bathing?”

I abruptly realized that my explanation wouldn’t make any sense to him, seeing as he didn’t know the specifics, but too much time had passed. My mind wasn’t functioning properly because of my nervousness and embarrassment. Thus, Takahiro obviously misunderstood.

“Should...I also take a bath?” he asked.

“Huh? No. Why?”

“Uh? Why...?”

Takahiro froze in confusion. We looked at each other, both bewildered. We seemed to be talking at cross-purposes.

Incidentally, looking back on this moment, none of it was Takahiro’s fault. I’d been careless, through and through. It was easy to understand Takahiro’s perspective after I thought it over. I’d visited the room of a man I was intimate with late at night. Not only that, but I’d gone out of my way to take a bath beforehand, something I didn’t normally do. And then, I’d asked for a resupply of mana—for his body fluids—and had informed him I’d taken a bath for that purpose. It didn’t need to be said what kind of misunderstanding this would invite.

Shortly after that, we unraveled the misunderstanding. Or rather, I realized my grand failure—a more accurate way of describing my state of mind.

“Aaaagh...” I groaned incomprehensibly. My entire body trembled. Every fiber of my being was embarrassed. “What a thing to do...”

I staggered, lowering myself onto the edge of the bed, but I failed to support my weight and had to place both my hands on the bed as well. That was how shocking this all was.

“Y-You mistook this for a night call...?” I muttered.

Now that I considered my behavior, it was reasonable to interpret it as a bold move. Actually, any other interpretation would have been strange. And yet, I only just came to this realization. It wasn’t that I lacked this type of knowledge or anything. There were more men than women in the Third Company, so I’d heard plenty of vulgar jokes. However, during that period, I’d considered myself no more than a knight, so I’d regarded such things as utterly unrelated to me. Now that I acknowledged myself as a girl, all of that came back to me.

“That was so immodest...” I mumbled.

“Um, I mean, honestly, I thought it was weird too,” Takahiro said, trying to console me. “You seem like a late bloomer, and you give off more of a refined impression. Besides, I couldn’t sense anything of the like in your expression or through the mental path. And, above all else, it was too sudden.”

He’d put it that way to be considerate, but it pointed out how my behavior and actions had been utterly mismatched. I could see how that would invite confusion.

“I apologize for being such a bother...” I said, my shoulders slumping.

“You’re exaggerating. I was just a little surprised.”

“It wasn’t just you. Rose and Mana also... Ah!”

I let out a small shriek as I recalled Mana’s baffling words and Kei’s mysteriously excited state.

“Oh yeah, you said you took a bath, huh?” Takahiro said sympathetically, guessing what had happened based on my reaction. “Did they misunderstand too?”

“It seems that way...”

Mana had definitely misunderstood. Rose, who was even denser than I was when it came to romantic sensibilities, likely hadn’t understood what was going on at all. Mana was going to explain it to her afterward, though. My consciousness faded away at the thought. And then there was Kei. I finally understood why she’d been cheering me on.

“I must apologize, Takahiro. Forgive me. I need to clear things up with Mana, Rose, and Kei...”

I staggered back to my feet, but unexpectedly, Takahiro grabbed my arm.

“Hang on a sec,” he said.

“Ah...”

With my focus elsewhere, he easily pulled me back. After that, I felt the warmth of human skin. For a moment, I had no idea what was going on. The instant I figured it out, it felt like my blood was burning, even though I had none.

“T-Takahiro?!”

I found myself in Takahiro’s embrace as he sat on the bed.

“Oh, you really are warm.”

I heard his amused voice right next to my ear. I felt the heat of his arms around me. It was the heat of a living being, a warmth that didn’t require an external source like I did. I’d come here to ask for mana—for a kiss—but this was still too sudden for me. It didn’t feel bad, of course. Not in the least. That was exactly why I was so stiff.

“I’m sure you’re planning on correcting the misunderstanding right away, but calm down a little,” he said. I couldn’t possibly calm down, though. I merely remained still and continued to listen to him. “Rose doesn’t need any clarification, but Katou might be sleeping. Kei too. If you’re going to talk with them, you should wait until tomorrow.”

“Oh. That’s...true.”

A fair amount of time had passed since I dropped by Takahiro’s room, so it wouldn’t be strange for them to be asleep already. It also wasn’t a good reason to wake them up.

“Sorry, Takahiro.”

I wanted to shrink away. I’d panicked so much that I hadn’t realized something so simple. I’d never done anything so careless in all my years as a knight. I’d always acted with discipline, but acting like any other girl was much

different. I couldn't control my emotions.

"I feel like I've been hopeless around you all this time," I said.

"Maybe so," Takahiro agreed, but he didn't sound disappointed. "But that's fine, right?" On the contrary, he seemed happy. "You're cool and gallant as a knight, but right now, you're very cute. I really like it."

It felt like my heart would stop, but that was merely a hallucination. My heart had stopped beating long ago. His words had just caught me off guard to a surprising degree. I knew Takahiro had no ulterior motives. He'd simply stated that something was pretty or cute, like one might comment about a flower. It wasn't meant as a pickup line or anything, but I was growing more hopeless by the second. It was like I was gradually getting worse and worse, yet better and better at the same time. It was an inexplicable feeling.

As a knight, this was all unfamiliar to me, but as a girl, I knew it was fine. Just maybe, falling in love meant becoming a hopeless wreck. The knight in me sensed this, but when it was just the two of us, this was okay.

I wasn't a wreck; I was in love with him. I'd panicked and acted rather unbecoming, then basked in happiness from the smallest things. All of it felt so dear to me.

Before I knew it, our lips were touching. Takahiro looked a little surprised, so I'd probably been the one to make a move. The thought of resupplying my mana had completely slipped my mind. I clumsily matched the contours of our lips, and a sweet sensation filled me to the very tips of my fingers, but it wasn't enough. That intense feeling drew me into him much, much deeper.

I left everything to the flow of this sweet sensation and thought of nothing but him.

Monster Tamer

10

Author

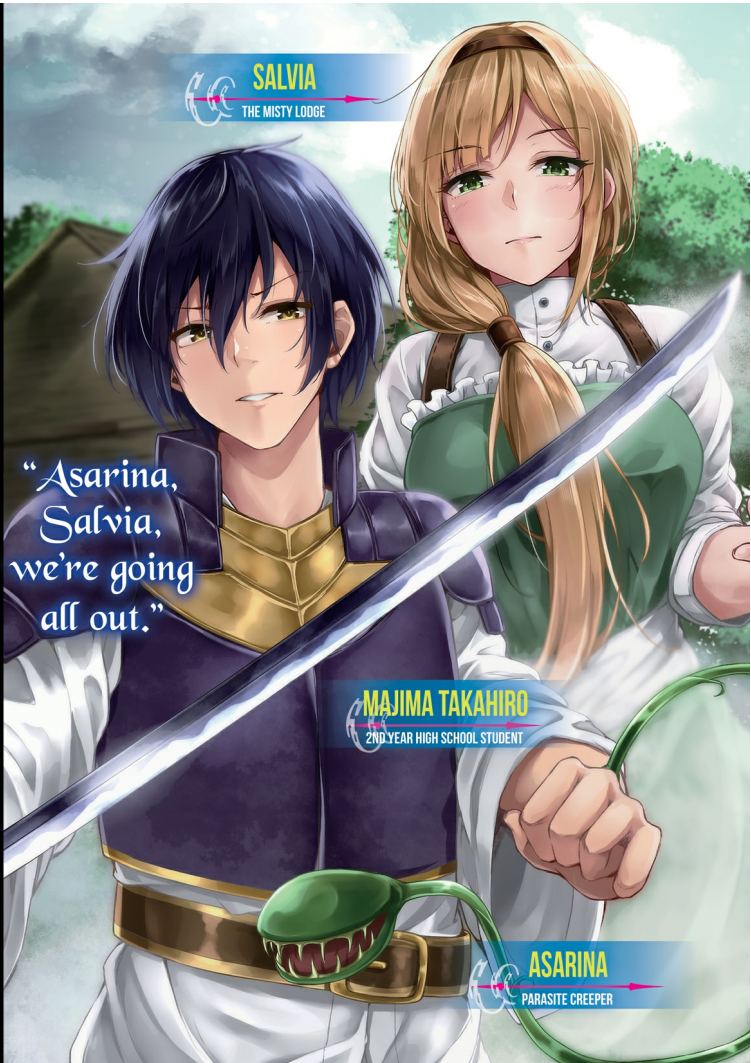
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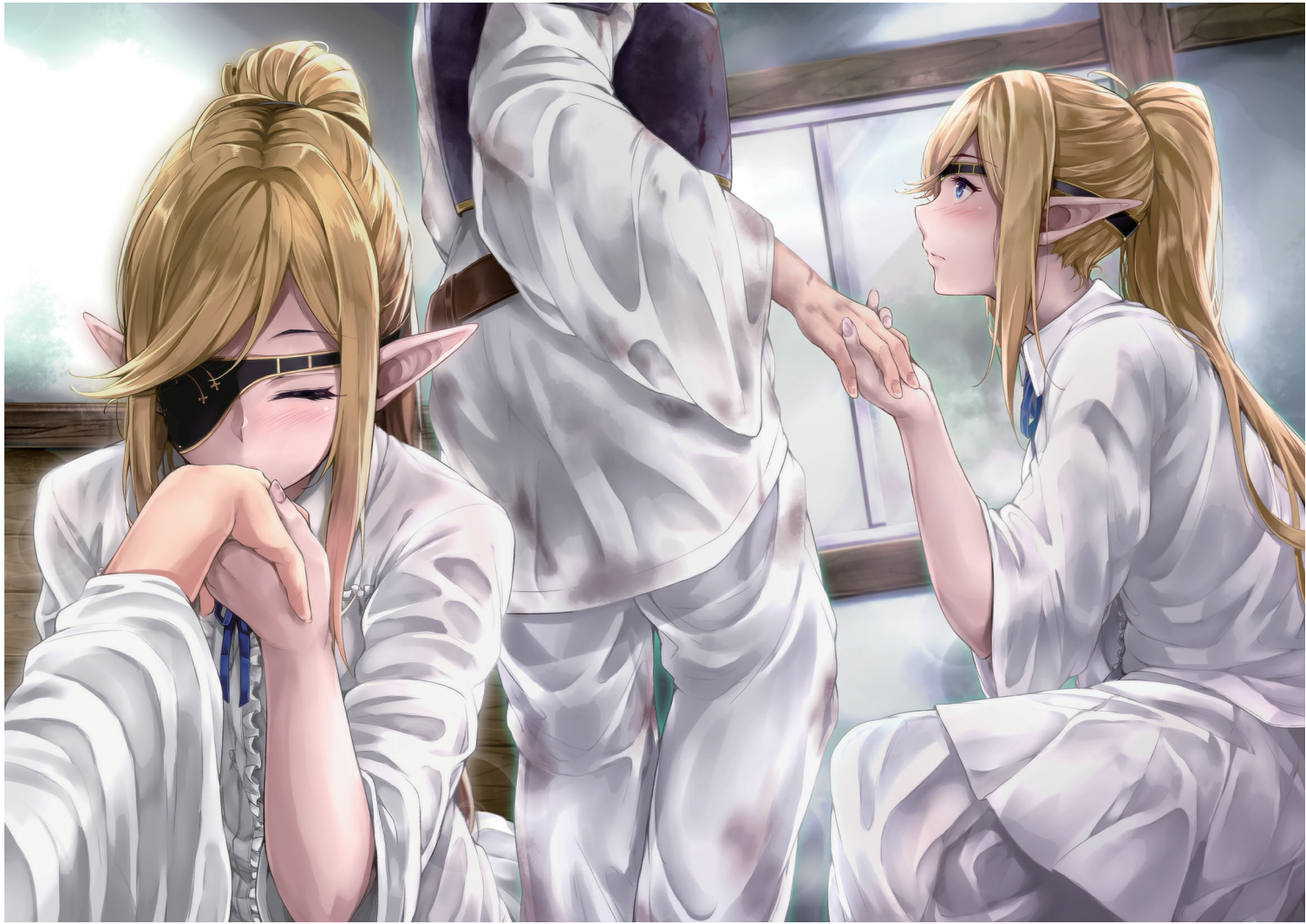
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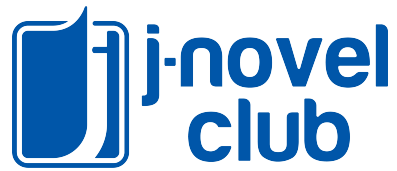
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by Minto Higure

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